A Little Son of Sunshine

Ellen Douglas Deland

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"LEANING ON HIS CRUTCHES, HE STOOD LOOKING UP AT MRS. TOPPAN"

A Little Son of Sunshine

A Story for Boys and Girls

By

Ellen Douglas Deland

Author of
"Josephine" "Oakleigh"
"In the Old Herrick House" etc.

Illustrated by
W. E. Mears

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To
Dr. Francis B. Harrington

Illustrations

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I

THE sun was setting behind the range of hills. It was the first of June and the days were growing towards their longest. A golden glory filled the western sky as the sun dropped, but the line of hills was very black. Mrs. Toppan sat in her rocking-chair, tilting to and fro, her idle hands upon its arms, her knitting on her lap, while she gazed at the sunset. Mr. Toppan, sitting with his back turned to get all the light there was, smoked his evening pipe and read the *Farmers' Weekly*. A large, white-and-brown dog lay stretched at his feet.

"It does seem as if something ought to be done," said Mrs. Toppan.

There was no reply. A cat-bird in the orchard on the other side of the road sang his good-night song, the frogs that lived in the little stream beyond the orchard lifted their voices in their own melodious fashion, the air was filled with

nature's evening music. In the distance the farm-hands shouted to one another as they finished their work and made ready for their night's rest, and still farther away was heard the trot-trot of a horse's hoofs, crossing the bridge that lay between the village and the Toppan farm and then beating steadily over the road.

"Here comes the General," said Mrs. Toppan.

Presently a man on horseback approached, passed, and, turning a bend in the road, disappeared. He touched his hat with his riding-stock as he rode by the house and the Toppans bowed.

"I suppose he's going home to that great big house to play his fiddle, same as he always does," said Mrs. Toppan. "I should think he'd be so lonesome he'd do most anything to get somebody to come and live there. I'd go crazy if I was alone like that."

Farmer Toppan removed his pipe from his thin lips. He had a long, lean face with a sparse beard. His mouth looked as if it seldom smiled, but his eyes, gray, sharp, shrewd, gleamed with humor.

"Folks ain't all made alike," said he, "and what suits one don't suit another. I guess you would find it rather hard, Marthy, if you was obliged to ride horseback and play the fiddle. Whereas the General, he likes it and wouldn't set

much store by your dish-washing and dusting. There's no use pitying folks until you know for a certainty they need it."

"Well, there's some I know needs it," said Mrs. Toppan, speaking with decision. "And it's about them I was going to talk to you, Dan'el, a little while ago, only you was so absorbed in that *Farmers' Weekly* you didn't take in a word I said."

Mr. Toppan resumed his paper. "It's wonderful," said he, "what they're doing about the brown-tail moth."

"Now look here, Dan'el, you'll just oblige me, please, by putting down that paper. It's not often I interfere with your doings—except when I see you going straight to ruination spending money on new-fangled farm-implements and other useless inventions. As I say, it's not often I speak, but I've got something on my mind and you've got to hear it."

"So it 'll be on my mind too, I suppose. All right, Marthy, go ahead."

"It's about those children in the city."

"What children?"

"Dan'el Toppan, it just shows how much attention you pay to what I tell you! You heard me talking to Lucetta Smith about 'em, plain as could be. It does seem as if something ought to be done to help 'em, and as long as that idea's

come home to me the way it has, I believe I'm the one the Lord's marked out to do it. It's my firm belief these inspirations ain't sent to people just to pass the time of day, or to divert their minds. It was the same way when it came to me to put money in a sewing-machine, which I've never regretted, and it was borne in on me to take our savings out of that bank in South Maybury that failed so soon afterwards. I can't get this one out of my mind at all, try as I will."

"Is it something you want to buy, Marthy?"

"No, Mr. Toppan, it's not. These things ain't had for money. I want one of those crippled children to look after."

"One of those crippled children?"

"Yes, and a girl if possible. The Lord hasn't seen fit to give us children of our own, Dan'el. It's a thing it's been hard to reconcile myself to, but I suppose I'm not the only childless mother in the world. I've been thinking about it a good deal, especially at sunset-time. I was thinking to-night how I'd like to go tuck 'em up in bed, if I only had 'em, and hear 'em say their prayers, and then it come to me, just as sudden as a clap of thunder if the sun was shining, why don't we take one of those little helpless ones? As the Lord seems to have made mothers without children, He may have marked us out to take the

children that have no mothers, and look after them a bit."

Mr. Toppan puffed silently at his pipe. He too would have liked children of his own, a son to inherit the name and the farm, a daughter to keep the house young and merry, but he wanted them to be his own. Other people's children would not by any means be the same thing. He turned in his chair and looked at his wife. He had long ago decided that women were curious creatures, and that it was not at all worth while for men to try to understand them.

"Marthy," said he, "I don't approve of adopting. You don't know their forebears and there's no way of telling what they'll turn out."

"Adopting has never entered my mind," said Mrs. Toppan, with indignant energy, sitting up very straight in the rocking-chair. "Though now I come to think of it, I don't know as adopting a child is any more of a risk than marrying. It's all an uncertainty till you try it. But what I'm thinking of is having one here to spend the summer. Here we've got an empty house and plenty of food to fill a dozen hungry mouths. I saw the picture of those crippled children, and try as I will I can't forget them. It was in a printed report or something Lucetta Smith got up to the city."

"Well," said Mr. Toppan, rising as he spoke,

"I never have denied you anything that was reasonable, Marthy, and now we've been living together going on twenty years, I don't know as I'll begin, but I've got to think it over. I can't say as quick as you'd like to have me, that I'd care to fill the house up with strange children, and cripples at that. I've got to think it over, and I guess I'll be going along to the post-office now. The mail's in."

"If that isn't just like you, Dan'el, going off as soon as you find you can't answer! And talk about women exaggerating! They don't know what the word means compared to a man. All I want is one little girl, and you talk about filling the house with cripples."

Mr. Toppan did not linger for further discussion, but whistling to the dog Dandy, he walked out of the front gate and turned towards the village. Mrs. Toppan rose, and after one more lingering look at the sky, now changing from red to purple and from purple to the sudden gray of fast approaching night, she went into the house. She lighted the lamp in the sitting-room, and busied herself for a few minutes in the kitchen. Then she mounted the stairs and looked into one after another of the empty rooms.

"I suppose the Lord knew what He was about," she said to herself, "but somehow the ache's harder to bear to-night than it ever was. The

girls would have been Gladys and Beatrice. I always thought those names were real high sounding, but the boy would have been Christopher, after my father and his father before him. Well, there's no use lamenting over what can't be helped, but I s'pose there's no harm in trying to stop an aching. I'll go down and soothe myself with my knitting till Dan'el gets back, and then we'll talk it out."

But when Mr. Toppan returned, his mind was occupied with other matters. The evening mail had brought him a letter from the city urging him to come immediately to attend to some affairs connected with the milk, which, with vegetables and other farm produce, was sent every day from the Toppan farm, in Maybury, to the dealers in town. Daniel Toppan was regarded by his neighbors as a very prosperous man.

When he told his wife that he must go away for a few days on the following morning, she gave a little gasp but said nothing. It seemed a direct answer to her wishes. She was a woman, however, who was wise enough to bide her time. She listened to the letter, and to her husband's speculations as to what would be the result of his visit, and then she followed him up-stairs and packed his bag. It was a canvas bag, of old-fashioned "worsted work," that always accompanied its owner on his trips to the city. When

he went down-stairs to speak to the head man and give directions about the farm-work to be done in his absence, Mrs. Toppan paused in her packing and for a moment stood very still, with her hands clasped. She was a motherly looking woman with a round and pleasant face. Her hair was dark and very smooth, and her eyes were hazel. Sometimes they were bright and keen, but to-night they were filled with a brooding softness. She spoke aloud: "Dear Lord," she said, "Thou knowest I have not a chick or a child. Thy will be done, O Lord! *Thy will be done.* But *please*, dear Lord, let me take a little, helpless child to look after this summer, and soften the heart of Dan'el on this subject. Amen." Then she continued to pack the bag.

After a time Mr. Toppan returned. "Well, Marthy," said he, "what shall I bring you from the city? Want a new bonnet? Or would you rather have a picture or something like that?"

"Dan'el Toppan," said his wife, standing before him, "there's but one thing I want. I sha'n't say much, but what I do say you can think over after you've gone. I want you should go to that Home I saw the report of and pick out an ailing girl that needs country air. Ask them to let us have her for the summer. A girl, Dan'el, and with golden hair and blue eyes if possible. She'll be nice and quiet, and as she won't be able to

run about, I'll teach her to sew and to knit. She can wipe the dishes, too. About ten years old. If we'd had children, Dan'el, the oldest ones would have been just growing up and going out in the world — the boys, you know — but a little girl about ten or twelve would have been learning things at home."

Then she threw her arms about his neck and laid her head on his shoulder.

"You'll think it over, won't you, Dan'el?"

He smoothed her hair with a gentle touch. "There, there, Marthy!" said he. "Yes, I'll think it over."

The next morning he went to the city by an early train.

Left at home alone, Mrs. Toppan occupied herself as much as possible with her daily tasks, but it was difficult to keep her mind from dwelling upon the topic which had become so momentous to her. At times she was confident that Daniel would accede to her entreaties, then again she would be plunged in despair, feeling sure that he would return alone.

"He wasn't at all reassuring," said she to herself. "He gave no promises. Long as I've lived with Dan'el I don't feel that I understand him completely, or can be sure of what he'll do. He wants to please me, I know that, but if he isn't positive my way's the best way, wild horses

won't make him do it. Dear me, how shall I ever live through these three days! He's only been gone three hours and it seems like a year."

But at last the time wore away, and the Saturday arrived which was the day upon which Mr. Toppan was to return. The afternoon train upon which he was coming was due at Maybury at half-past five. The station was within twenty minutes' walk of the farm, being about a mile away.

"I hope Dan'el will have the sense to hire Timothy Tarleton's team," said Mrs. Toppan, more than once. "It would be too far for her to walk. Perhaps she's quite helpless. Oh, I hope he's got her, and she's blue-eyed and golden-haired! May be her name is Alice. The little darling! If he's come without her I don't know as I can bear it."

In the mean time, Daniel Toppan, in the city, had given the matter no small amount of consideration. He wished to please his wife, whose heart seemed so absorbed with this hitherto unsuspected plan. He wondered how long she had been thinking of it before she mentioned it. He did not altogether approve of it. He thought it would "upset things at the farm pretty considerably." He was a kind man, but he was somewhat "set in his ways." The prospect of having a

child in the house, and that a lame and probably suffering child, presented no attractions for him. But at last he decided on the morning of the day that he was to go back that he would visit the Home. Otherwise he should not dare to face his wife. He would look for a golden-haired blue-eyed girl of ten or twelve, who could be taken on a journey of fifty miles. It was not at all probable that such a one could be found. Then, with an easy conscience, he would return to Maybury and tell Martha that there was none to be had. It was ten o'clock when he reached this conclusion. His milk business was satisfactorily settled, his affairs were going prosperously, and he felt pleased with himself and with the world in general.

"I will buy Martha something or other after I've been to the Home, to make up for her disappointment," said he. "A breast-pin or something. Women like those fandangoes. A real handsome one. It will divert her mind."

A little later that day as the farmer walked through the wards of a Home for suffering children, looking in vain for a golden-haired girl, he heard the sound of a violin. Mr. Toppan was fond of music, and in his youth had sung in the choir. Even now he lent a lusty bass to the hymns in church, and laid away at home was a flute upon which in days gone by he had trilled a tune or two.

"What's that music?" he asked, standing still to listen.

"Oh, that's Chris," replied the attendant. "You haven't been in that ward yet. If you wanted a boy now! But you say it must be a girl."

She led him into the adjoining room. There, in a chair against the back of which leaned a pair of small crutches, sat a boy of about ten years of age. His head was bent above a violin while he played a lively air. About him, in a semi-circle, sat half a dozen children, some with iron harness on their limbs, some with crutches close at hand, some with their arms in slings. All had suffered, and all had that look of pathetic happiness in their faces which suffering children by some strange miracle wear. At present they were supremely content. Those whose feet were free stamped them in time to the music; those who could not indulge in that delightful pastime waved their arms in rhythmic unison. There was a child who could do neither, so she only smiled.

Mr. Toppan and his guide approached the group, and stood there, listening. The boy finished his tune. Then, and not until then, he looked up. He looked up, and his eyes rested upon Mr. Toppan. The man and the boy gazed at each other for one long moment. The farmer

saw a childish face, pale, and somewhat thin from suffering and confinement, from out of which shone the most beautiful blue eyes he had ever looked into. Then the boy laid aside the violin, and taking his crutches he stood up. He had but one leg.

"Oh!" cried the children, in a chorus of dismay. "Ain't yer goin' ter play any more, Chris? Please, Chris, gives us another toon. A jolly one, Chris."

"No," said Chris. "I'm through now." And without waiting for further words he walked rapidly away, his crutches thumping on the hard-wood floor. Mr. Toppan turned to the nurse.

"Can we have him?" he asked, in a low voice. "My wife said a girl, with light hair and blue eyes. He's a boy, but he's got the blue eyes. Ain't they wonderful, those eyes of his! They're as honest as sunshine. Chris, you say his name is—Chris! That's strange—it was her father's name, Christopher. I guess that 'll reconcile her to his being a boy; especially as there ain't a blue-eyed girl to be had."

There were further questions and investigations. Mr. Toppan was able to give sufficient guarantee that he could be trusted to look after the boy, and on the other hand he found out what little there was to know about Christopher. The child had been run over, and had been taken

to a hospital for treatment. His leg had been amputated, and he was now on the road to recovery. He was in sad need of country air, and the nurses had been at a loss to know how to provide it. Apparently he had not a friend in the world, for no one had ever come to claim him, and he had asked for no one. There was a strange reserve about the boy. He had told them that his father and mother were dead, and the person he had lived with was not a relative. He would not divulge the name of this person. "I don't want him to find me," he had said, over and over again. He had been playing the fiddle in the streets. The little violin was picked up unharmed at the time of his accident, and brought with him to the hospital. That was all that was known about him, except that his name was Christopher Lovel, and that around his neck had been a little chain from which had hung a wedding-ring. Inside the ring were initials and a date. This was to be kept for him at the Home until his return in the autumn.

II

THE train came to a stand-still at Maybury station. As was their daily custom, a number of men and boys had gathered to witness its arrival. There were three trains each way during the day, which made six events of varying importance. The one due at half-past five from the city brought the largest number of passengers. The travelling salesmen usually came by this train, and they were always interesting. To-night Daniel Toppan was among those who arrived, and with him—the village gossips looked, and looked again—was a small boy on crutches.

"He ain't got but one leg," remarked Hiram Grant to Sam Wilson. "Where'd Dan'el pick *him* up? Look at him, walkin' off's spry as can be. Sakes alive! Don't he manage them crutches well!"

The onlookers were still further astonished when Mr. Toppan approached Timothy Tarleton, and a few minutes later helped the small boy into Timothy's wagon, which was as usual drawn up for possible customers. The worsted-work

bag was handed in, followed by an extension-bag that was unmistakably new, and then Mr. Toppan climbed in himself. Timothy Tarleton, with a flick of his whip and an encouraging chirrup, urged his reluctant steed into the semblance of a trot, and the old carry-all rattled away, followed by the curious and regretful gaze of the station loungers. There had not been time to ask Daniel Toppan a single question.

They drove along the main street, and Chris looked about him with eager eyes. Near the station was a store in which was also the post-office. There was a livery-stable, and then the hotel, the Maybury House. The street was wide, and on either side were white houses. At a little distance from the station they turned to the left and drove along a narrower road shaded by trees.

"What was that water by the railroad?" asked Christopher, after a silence that had lasted several minutes. "Was it part of the ocean?"

"No. There's no ocean anywhere near here," replied Mr. Toppan. "That was the lake, Maybury Lake, and this stream we're coming to is Maybury River. It flows out of it, and gets to be quite a big river further down. Did you ever see a lake before?"

"No," said Chris. "I've never seen a lake, and I've never seen mountains." Here they emerged from the woods, and there was a fine

view of the valley and the hills beyond. "I've never seen 'em, but somehow I seem to know them. Oh!" He drew a long breath and was silent.

Presently, after more woods and the crossing of a bridge, a white farm-house came into sight. It was close to the road, and beyond it were great, white barns and sheds. Across the road from the house was the orchard, now white with apple-blossoms. A vegetable garden stretched up over the slope behind the house.

"There's the farm," said Mr. Toppan. "There's where you're going to pass the summer. And there's a lady waiting for us on the piazza that's going to be very kind to you."

As the carriage approached and then stopped, Mrs. Toppan rose from her chair. She stood perfectly still while her husband clambered out of the vehicle.

"He's got her," she said to herself. "I knew it the minute I heard the team coming. Oh! Why, Dan'el!" she exclaimed, aloud. "It's a boy!"

"Yes, it's a boy," he called out, and then taking the bags he walked up the little path to the house, followed by Chris. Timothy Tarleton lingered a moment to watch the meeting. Then he turned his carriage with a loud scrape of the wheel. He was so occupied with the scene in

front of the house that he was almost upset. He leaned out as he moved slowly away, and looked back until the trees hid from his view the Toppan farm.

"What are they up to now?" said he to himself. "'Tain't a relation evidently, and he warn't expected. She said 'It's a boy!' as if she was kinder took aback. Was she expectin' anything else?"

Seated on the bench in front of the post-office that evening he repeated Mrs. Toppan's remark more than once. Very soon the whole village was absorbed in the subject, and for the time being the matter of the arrival of a boy on crutches at the Toppan farm shut out interest even in the forthcoming political convention in the West.

Mr. Toppan walked up the path. With a bag in each hand, and his straw hat well down over his eyes, he stood in front of his wife.

"It's a boy, Marthy. There warn't no girls with blue eyes that could take the journey. I saw him and — and — somehow I couldn't help bringing him. His name's Christopher."

Then he stood aside. Chris was waiting in the path. Leaning on his crutches, he stood looking up at Mrs. Toppan. "Did you want him to bring a girl?" said he. "Jess would have come, or little Agnes. I—I can go back if you'd rather have a girl." His voice faltered. He looked

from right to left at the green trees, the white apple blossoms, the lilac-bushes in bloom that grew close to the house. "It's nice here. I like it—but they'd like it, too. I can go back."

Mrs. Toppan stepped down from the porch. She was wearing her best afternoon dress, but she knelt on the gravel path, and put her arms about the little, lame boy. "Go back!" she repeated. "You precious lamb! Indeed you sha'n't go back. And your name is Christopher! It's too wonderful."

Mr. Toppan watched them with satisfaction. "I thought you'd take to each other," said he. "I thought I'd risk it. Here's his bag, Marthy. We bought it on our way to the station, and we got him a suit of clothes. Lying in the hospital so long he didn't have much. His fiddle's in the bag, too. Chris plays the fiddle."

Dandy, who had rushed to meet his master, walked slowly up to the boy and thrust his nose into the little hand. Then they all went into the house.

That night it was long before Christopher could sleep. He lay in the big four-post bed and stared at the window. Outside was the country. The green, beautiful, quiet country. It was so still that he could hear the insects shrilling, the frogs croaking, the barking of a dog very far away, and presently Dandy answered from just under the

window. It was not yet dark, although it was eight o'clock, and by sitting up in bed he could see everything in the room. The high, old-fashioned bureau, the table on which the candlestick stood, the wash-stand with its blue-and-white china. On the walls were some pictures. There was one picture with a great many people in it and a lamb. He had not yet had time to examine it. He longed for the next day, that he might look at it—and at everything. What delights the next day would bring forth! First of all, there would be that nice dog to play with. Then he wondered if he should have as good milk for breakfast as he had had for supper, with delicious bread broken up in it. There had been milk to drink at the Home, but not served in a beautiful, big pitcher, nor poured into a gilt-and-white mug with an inscription on it, "Love the Giver." Only last night had he lain in his little bed in the great ward, with nineteen other little beds just like his in the same room, and a kind nurse going from one to the other to see that all was right, while outside the clang of electric cars, the rumble of carriages, the rush of automobiles, the stir and roar of the city continued nearly all night long. Here it was so still, and he was but one, the only cripple, the only child, and Mrs. Toppan had put him to bed and heard him say, "Now I lay me," and he was almost sure, indeed,

he was quite sure, that she had cried a little when she kissed him good-night. He did not know why, for he himself felt very happy. Had she cried because he was not a girl? He thought not, for she spoke very tenderly to him and said she was glad his name was Christopher. It was all very nice, and so still, so beautifully still. And after awhile he fell asleep.

When he awoke the next morning the sun was shining in all its June glory. It flooded the room with its radiance, for Christopher's windows faced the east. He wondered if he were expected to get up and dress himself, and just then his question was answered by the entrance of Mrs. Toppan. She was in a clean, cool-looking chintz gown, and she was smiling at him. Christopher smiled back at her.

"I'm glad it isn't a dream," he said. "I was 'most afraid it was and I'd wake up in my little bed at the Home. I'd like to see Miss Rogers and Jess and the others, of course, 'cause they're my friends you know, but I'm awful glad I'm here!"

Mrs. Toppan leaned over and kissed him. "I'm glad you are, dear."

"You kissed me just like my mother," said Chris. "Guess you've had little boys like me to kiss. Where are they now?"

"I never had any."

"Well, I'll be your little boy. My own mother don't need me any longer, 'cause she's gone away to the sky to live. So's my father. He's living there, too. They told me at the Home they were living in the sky, but I don't see how it's possible, do you? I suppose they're somewhere beyond the blue, too far off for us to see. I don't remember much about my mother, except the way she used to kiss me."

"And do you remember your father?"

"Yes, I remember him better. We lived together a long time. There was only us. Then he had a cold and he coughed and coughed. One day I found him very still, and he never spoke to me after that, and they took him away—and I went to live with somebody."

"And who was that?"

Chris hesitated a minute. "If you don't mind," said he, presently, "I'd rather not say anything more about him. He was a man father used to know. I don't want to see him again, no, *never!*" He spoke with vehemence. "And that's why I'm real glad to come to this place. He'll never find me here. And even if he did, you wouldn't let him take me?" He fixed his blue eyes upon her with an imploring gaze. "You wouldn't let him? He's not my relation."

"No, dear, we wouldn't let him," said Mrs. Toppan, tenderly. "We'll take care of you."

"I thought you would," said the boy, with a sigh of contentment.

They ate an early breakfast at the farm and a hurried one. There was much to be done, and little enough time to do it in, even in the long June day. Daniel Toppan, while not a hard master, was considered to be strict. He himself did not know the meaning of the word "lazy," and he exacted from his men the same ceaseless industry. Sam Wilson, the village wit and "ne'er do weel," said of him that "Dan'el Toppan wouldn't let the grass grow under his feet, but somehow he made it grow everywhere else." There were three men who lived at the farm, and others who were hired to work by the day. They all took their meals with Mr. and Mrs. Toppan, so the seats at table were many. Chris looked at the sunburned "help" with interest. He wished that he could work on the farm. One by one they rose and left the kitchen. He could hear them tramping away.

"What's the matter, Chris?" asked Mr. Toppan, as he too left the table and set his chair carefully against the wall. "You look kind of solemn. Are you wishing you was back at the Home?"

"No, sir. I was wishing I could do things outdoors. Do you think—do you think a feller with one leg could ever do farming?"

"We'll see—we'll see. Don't you worry your

little head about that. You can learn to drive the cows home anyway, can't he, Marthy? You come out now and look at 'em. Guess you've never seen finer cattle than mine, if as fine."

Christopher, never having seen a cow in his life that he could remember, was somewhat appalled at finding himself among forty-five great creatures with fierce horns and gentle eyes. He stood in a safe place and watched them as they left the barn by a narrow doorway, each in turn, but struggling to outstrip one another. Henry, who was in charge, managed them in a manner that filled the boy with amazement. He wondered if he could possibly become sufficiently familiar with them to know them each by name, for each had a name marked above her stall. He watched until the last one had disappeared up the lane that led over the hill to the pasture. Then he went back to the house. Mrs. Toppan was washing the breakfast dishes, assisted by Anna, the Swedish girl. Chris would have been glad to help, but he did not like to ask. He had not wiped dishes at the Home, but he well remembered doing it when he lived with his father. To be sure he had two legs then, but still as he thought it over, it seemed to him that two legs were not necessary for the successful washing or wiping of dishes. He drew nearer.

"Say!" said he. "Couldn't I do it? I could

sit on a chair, you know, I wouldn't drop 'em."

And presently he was seated, and wielding a towel to the entire satisfaction of Mrs. Toppan, while Anna went off to attend to her other duties.

An hour or so later, Christopher was sitting upon the steps of the piazza. He had finished the dishes, had explored the barn, had investigated the hennery, under the guidance of Anna, and had enjoyed all the excitement and triumph of finding the day's eggs. Now, with his crutches beside him, he was resting.

"Wish Jess and Agnes and all of 'em could see me," he thought. "Wish they were all here. I'd like to see 'em. Hullo! Who's coming?"

Up the road from the direction of the village came a group of children. There were two boys and three girls, and they carried books and lunch-baskets. They were talking earnestly, but as they approached the house they became silent. Their faces were turned towards Chris, and they walked more and more slowly. One girl stopped to pick some dandelions, a boy stooped to tie his shoe, the other boy and the smallest girl stood still and deliberately stared at the stranger. Only one girl walked on without stopping or looking back. Christopher, sitting on the steps, calmly stared back. Every one of those five children was perfectly strong and well. To him it was a

most wonderful and interesting sight. He had seen no child during the last year who was not obliged to use crutches, or be treated by the surgeon for some malady.

Presently the girl who had walked on, stopped and called the others. Even now she did not look back. "Come along!" she shouted, standing quite still. "You'll be late for school. Come on, Flo! You'd better hurry."

"Oh, I say now, Rachel Amy," cried the boy, who was busy with his shoe. "There ain't no hurry—I say, kid," he continued, in a drawling tone, "where d'yer hide yer other leg? Got it in yer pocket?"

Christopher flushed a deep red. The children who were near tittered. The girl in front turned and walked back. Her face was crimson, too, and her eyes blazed with anger.

"Ain't you ashamed, Tom Wilson! If you ain't I sh'd think you'd better be! I just knew you'd say something like that! You think it's funny, but it ain't. It's real mean. Just you go to school, all o' you."

She drove them before her, as Henry had driven the cows to pasture. They all obeyed her imperious voice and gesture, even the mischievous Tom.

"Yer needn't be so cross," he whined. "I ain't said nothin'."

Christopher could not hear the girl's reply, for she had hurried away, still without looking at him. He watched them as they walked up the road. Very soon they had all passed out of sight.

"Wonder why he said that," thought the boy. "If he'd said any more, or if that girl hadn't come back, and there hadn't been any girls there, I'd have thrown one of my crutches at him. I felt just like it. Wonder where they've gone. Guess there's a school up the road."

He was just about to go into the house to make inquiries of Mrs. Toppan, when he heard the sound of an approaching horse. When it came around the bend in the road he found to his surprise that there was no vehicle, but that a gentleman was riding the horse. Christopher gazed with delight. He saw an elderly gentleman with gray hair. A soft hat came well down over his face, but beneath its brim Christopher could see the large nose and closely shut mouth. The gentleman did not look to the right or the left, but rode slowly by. In a moment he, too, had passed out of sight, and Christopher heard the horse's hoofs thumping over the bridge.

Then some more children appeared, but when he saw them coming he seized his crutches and limped hastily into the house. It was the first time that it had been brought home to him that

he was now unlike other children. Since the day of his accident he had lived with cripples, and had not fully realized the change that had come to him. He did not quite understand it now. He was only conscious that he did not wish to be asked again about his other leg. He went into the sitting-room and watched the children pass. They all looked towards the house with interest, just as the others had done. He wondered why, for the gentleman had not once glanced in that direction. And they also were walking without the aid of crutches. One boy stopped to get a drink from the Toppans' pump, which was near the road. He pumped vigorously, and then, finding himself left behind, he ran to overtake the others. Christopher, who had hidden himself while they were passing, now went to the door and looked after him.

"Giminy!" said he. "How I wish I could run again! I used to run as fast as that."

Then he went in search of Mrs. Toppan. He did not at first mention the children, but he told her he had seen a gentleman on horseback.

"That's the General," said she, "General Keith. He'll be passing by again in about an hour. He's as regular as a clock, the General is. He lives in a big house farther up the road. How are you getting along, Chris?"

"Very well," said he. "Did you see the chil-

dren going by to school? Does school begin at nine o'clock?"

"Yes."

"Then I guess I'll sit on the steps some more and watch for the General to come back."

"What do you want to see the General for?"

"I like his horse," said Chris.

Then he returned to his post. After awhile the General appeared. This time his horse was trotting, and very soon he had again passed out of sight.

"Oh!" said Chris, with a long sigh. "I wonder if a fellow with only one leg could ride a horse. I wonder when I grow up if *then* I could ride! I should think that General would be an awful happy man, 'cause he's got two legs and a horse."

He sat meditating this for some time. Then he mounted the stairs, and, going to his room, he took his violin.

"I'll play just as if Jess and Agnes and the others were here to listen," he said to himself. "Then it won't seem so lonesome."

He began to play a merry air, and presently he had forgotten that he had but one leg.

III

A FEW days later, in the afternoon, Christopher was at the pump taking a drink of cold spring-water, when he saw coming up the road from the village one of the children who passed the house on their way to school every morning. His first impulse was to hurry away, but he saw that it was the girl who had scolded the others for staring at him. This, and the desire for the society of some one of his own age, prompted him to stand his ground. Mrs. Toppan was very kind to him, but he missed his little friends at the Home. The girl, who seemed to be about twelve or thirteen years old, walked straight towards him. She had dark-brown hair, which she wore in one long braid, and which hung down her back. Her eyes were brown, too, and very pleasant, and there was a bright color in her cheeks. She wore a blue calico dress and a sailor hat, and she carried a basket.

"How do you do!" said she. "I don't know your name, but mine is Rachel Amy Martin.

I've come for some eggs. Do you think Mrs. Toppan's got any?"

"I guess she has," said Christopher. "I found some this morning. I found three."

Rachel Amy laughed, but very kindly. "We'll want more than three. My mother's heard that company's coming to supper and Aunt Lucetta's going to make sponge-cake. She says Toppan farm eggs make better sponge-cake than any others, since we gave up keeping hens. I'll go ask Mrs. Toppan."

"I'll go with you," said Christopher.

"You be just come, haven't you?" said Rachel Amy, as they went around to the back of the house.

"Yes," replied the boy. He hoped she would not ask him anything else. Somehow he did not want her to know that he had come from a Home. Then he suddenly determined to tell her.

"My name's Christopher Lovel, and I'm from a Home. They've brought me here to spend the summer. I was run over, and that's the reason I'm lame."

Rachel Amy turned to him, her brown eyes full of feeling. "It must be real hard to be lame," said she. "I am so sorry. But you get along nicely on your crutches. I don't see how you do it."

"Do you think so?" said Christopher, eagerly. "I'm getting used to 'em now. Sometime, before long, they said, I'll have a false leg and then nobody 'll know the difference, perhaps."

By this time they had reached the kitchen door, and Rachel Amy made her request for eggs. It happened that there were not quite enough in the house, so the children were sent out to look for more, which was very delightful to Chris, and which quickly made them better acquainted. When they emerged from the hen-house, he felt that Rachel Amy was a very old friend. He walked with her along the road on her way to the village.

"Where do you live?" he asked.

"In the house opposite the post-office, and just beyond. It sets back more than the others, and has a croquet-ground at the side. You'll know it because there are big white balls on the gate-post. I wish I lived on a farm."

"Have you got any brothers and sisters?"

"No, there's only me, and I haven't got any father either. There's just mother and Aunt Lucetta and me." Rachel Amy, hearing a footstep behind them, looked back. Then she crossed the road and walked beside Christopher. Until now they had been walking with the road between them. Presently a boy overtook and passed them. "There goes that Smith boy!" she said.

He was about sixteen years of age, and his clothes were shabby, and his whole appearance unprepossessing. He did not look at the children as he passed them.

"He's going to the village to buy things," said Rachel Amy, in a whisper. "They're very mysterious, and my mother says they're no good, but Aunt Lucetta is very sorry for them."

"Where do they live?" asked Christopher, deeply interested.

"Up the lane beyond the Toppans'. In the Wilson cottage, a little old house nobody ever lived in for years, because something awful happened there once. They're awful poor. There's a mother and a girl, about my age I guess, but I'm not allowed to speak to her. Nobody's allowed to speak to 'em; of my friends, I mean."

"They must be awful lonely."

"I suppose they are, but we're not allowed."

Christopher pondered this for a few minutes. He felt very sorry for the Smiths. He wondered if Rachel Amy would be "allowed" to speak to him, after it became known to her mother that he had come from a Home. Some instinct of delicacy prompted him to leave Rachel Amy and return to the farm. Her mother might not like it if he walked all the way home with her. He did not mention this, however. He merely

said that he thought he must go back now, and they parted.

Rachel Amy hurried on. Her aunt was waiting for the eggs, she knew. The oven had been heated to just the proper temperature, the other ingredients were measured and ready, and there was no time to be lost. In her haste she did not see a stone which lay in her path. She tripped, caught herself, and stumbled on, and as she dashed forward, the six eggs leaped from the basket and fell to the ground.

"Oh!" cried Rachel Amy. "Oh! Oh! Oh!"

Christopher heard her and turned. He had not gone very far, and it was not long before he reached her side.

"And there isn't another one at the farm!" moaned Rachel Amy, the tears running down her cheeks. "Mrs. Toppan said they'd all been sent to the city this morning. What will my mother say? How she'll scold! I've got to hurry home and tell her. The company's coming and no cake! Oh! Oh! Mother 'll think it an awful disgrace. How can I tell her!"

Without waiting for Christopher's attempts at consolation, she walked quickly away, wiping her eyes and sobbing. He stood for a moment surveying the yellow débris, and then thoughtfully retraced his steps towards the farm. It seemed such a pity that Rachel Amy, who was

such a nice girl, should be scolded for an accident which she probably could not have avoided. He did wish that he could do something to avert the scolding. Then it occurred to him that Mrs. Toppan had been making cake that morning. Perhaps he could prevail upon her to let him take some of it to Rachel Amy's scolding mother. He stumped along the road, wielding his crutches with wonderful skill and speed. He found Mrs. Toppan on the back porch with her knitting.

"Rachel Amy's broken all the eggs. She was 'most afraid to go home and tell her mother, but she's gone. They're going to have company and they haven't got any cake, and it's a disgrace. Can't I take 'em the cake you made this morning? Can't I, Mrs. Toppan? Rachel Amy's an awful nice girl. Can't I?"

"Well, I never heard the beat of that!" exclaimed Mrs. Toppan. Then she began to laugh. "It's the best joke ever I heard, offering cake to Liza Martin! I don't know which she'd mind the most, not having any to give her company, or accepting it from any one else. She's as proud as Lucifer."

Christopher stood in front of her, his eyes fixed upon her face, his own face troubled.

"I'd like to take it," said he. "Rachel Amy wouldn't let the boy laugh at me that morning,

and she's real nice, and she'll get a scolding about the eggs. I'd like to take her the cake."

"And so you shall," said Mrs. Toppan. "We'll just see how it turns out."

She went into the house, and presently the loaf of cake made that morning was wrapped in a napkin and placed in a basket.

"You tell her I sent it to her with my love, hearing she was going to have company," said Mrs. Toppan, "and if she says something spiteful, don't you mind it. She talks that way to everybody. Lucetta's real kind, but it won't do for you to take it to Lucetta. Mrs. Martin wouldn't like that any better. I don't see now how you're going to manage to carry it, child. You've got to use your two hands for your crutches."

Moved by a sudden impulse of pity, she stooped and kissed the bright, boyish face.

"Put it on my arm," said Chris, "and tie a string to it and put that around my neck. Then I won't drop it. You see, if I dropped it I couldn't pick it up, and there mightn't be anybody coming along to help me."

The basket was finally arranged to his satisfaction, and he hurried away. Mrs. Toppan stood looking after him. "Bless his little heart," she said, aloud. "It's wonderful the way he manages. I d'know as I ought to let him walk

so far. Do you know the house?" she called out.

"Yes," he replied, without pausing. "It's got white balls on the gate, and a croquet-ground. Rachel Amy told me."

In the mean time, Rachel Amy had reached home. She had conquered her sobs and summoned all her determination, and she was prepared to face with courage the ordeal that awaited her. Aunt Lucetta, in a big white apron, sat in a rocking-chair on the kitchen porch. Her sweet face, still youthful in spite of its lines, was serene and pleasant, and she turned to Rachel Amy with a welcoming smile.

"Well, child, we thought you'd never come. I hope you've got 'em. Martha Toppan don't often fail us."

"Oh, Aunt Lucetta!" exclaimed Rachel Amy, relieved to find her aunt alone, "what do you s'pose happened?"

"What, I'd like to know!" said a high, complaining voice from within the house. "Like as not, Rachel Amy, you've broken those eggs."

"Yes'm," said Rachel Amy, with a calmness born of despair, "I have. Every one. I 'most fell down and they all jumped out of the basket."

"Jumped out of the basket!" cried Mrs. Martin, appearing in the doorway. "As if eggs could jump! And Maria Davis coming to supper, who

has everything just as they do in the city! She always did look down on me, and now she will more'n ever. Well, there's one thing certain sure. You don't have any supper to-night. You go to bed right straight away. Now, Lucetta, don't you say one word. I'm not going to have you interfering between me and my child. But first of all, she can come in and clear up all the sponge-cake things. Put back the flour and the sugar and wash the dishes. Oven all het up and everything. I don't believe there ever was anybody as unfortunate as I am. From the time I was born things have gone criss-cross. I should ha' thought I might send for a half-dozen eggs and had 'em. It seems I've got to be thwarted even in a small thing like that."

"I'll make 'poor man's cake,'" said Miss Lucetta. "That don't require eggs, Lisa, and it's real good."

"'Poor man's cake,' indeed!" exclaimed Mrs. Martin. "As if I'd set my company down to cake without eggs! If there was only a place where you could buy cake, like you can in the city, or if only a neighbor'd give some, but they're awful close and stingy round here."

Miss Lucetta refrained from reminding her sister that the neighbors had long since given up making offers of kindness, for the reason that they were always repulsed, and also because their

eyes were mournful, the corners of her mouth drooped, and her general expression was that of one who is at war with the world. Christopher noticed nothing of this. His own face was smiling, and he broke into gleeful, childish laughter.

"I guess you'll think I'm a good fairy, won't you?" he said; "only I can't get around as fast as fairies can. I hurried as fast as I could, though, so's to get here 'most as soon as Rachel Amy."

Mrs. Martin hesitated. "I d'know's I want to accept charity from Mrs. Toppan," said she.

"I don't think I know exactly what you mean," said Christopher, now very grave. "She didn't say anything about charity. She sent her love, and hoped you'd use it."

Mrs. Martin, almost against her will, opened the screen door. "Step inside," said she, gruffly.

Christopher did so. He smiled at Rachel Amy, whom he now saw for the first time.

"It was hard luck you stumbled," said he.

Mrs. Martin opened the basket and took out the cake. It was done up in a napkin. "Bring a plate, Rachel Amy," said she. "There's no use keepin' this napkin. It 'll only have to be washed. There! Now you go back and tell Mrs. Toppan I'm much obliged, although I do think it's kinder interferin' in her to send it, and if I warn't at my wit's end about havin' company, I wouldn't take

it. You tell her it's Mrs. Davis from West Maybury. Be sure you tell her. She might just as well know it's somebody worth while that's comin'."

She turned away from the boy, and he felt that he had been dismissed.

"Good-bye," said he. "If you'll excuse me, I'll put on my hat before I go out; and will you please open the door for me? You see, I'm not much used to crutches yet."

Rachel Amy sprang forward to open the door. Miss Lucetta, who had said nothing as yet, came towards him also.

"You sit down and rest before you start back," said she, in her kind voice; "you must be real tired, and you come fast."

Christopher was inclined to accept this invitation, but he caught sight of Mrs. Martin's forbidding face. He saw at once that she was not pleased by the suggestion.

"Thank you," said he, "but I guess I must be going," and he left without further delay. He had reached the road, and was standing still, looking with curiosity and admiration at the large white balls which ornamented the gateposts, when Rachel Amy came around the corner of the house and ran down the path.

"Thank you, Christopher," said she. "You were real good to bring it. Mother said I must

go to bed, she was so disappointed about the eggs. P'r'aps she won't make me now, and it's all owing to you. It's horrid to go to bed so early."

Then she ran back. Christopher crossed the road to the shady side and walked slowly along the pathway which bordered the main street of the village. He hoped very much that he had saved Rachel Amy from being sent to bed at that hour, and he decided that her mother must be a very strange person, for the little girl certainly was not to blame for having broken the eggs. The Martins' house was at the farther end of the village, and it was necessary for him to pass the store before turning off the main street to follow the road which led to the farm. There were few people to be seen about at this hour of the day, for it was only four o'clock and the weather was hot, but on the platform or piazza in front of the store there were as usual one or two men. In the evening this platform was the resort for all the men of Maybury Centre, who sat there smoking their pipes and discussing the affairs of the village and the nation, every night while summer lasted, and when the weather grew too cold for this they took their places about the stove inside.

As Christopher passed he saw Sam Wilson, whom, however, he did not then know by name,

and Timothy Tarleton, who had driven them from the station the night they arrived. Mr. Tarleton's horse and carry-all stood in the shade not far from the store, while its owner passed away the hour and a half that must elapse before the next train in conversation with Sam Wilson.

"There he comes now," exclaimed Tarleton. "I never seen anything like the way he manages them crutches. I couldn't do it."

"No," drawled Wilson, "I don't believe yer could, Tim. It's as much as *you* can to manage ter get along on two legs. Yer have ter have a horse ter carry yer round."

Tarleton laughed good-naturedly. He was very lazy, and he had been informed of this fact so often that he knew it as well as any one.

"Hev yer joke—hev yer joke, Sam," said he. "I get a livin' out of it anyway. Now yo're just as lazy yerself, every mite, but yer don't do nothin' but set still and let yer wife look arter yer."

"Which you'd do if only you hed a wife," rejoined Sam. "But don't get discouraged, Tim, although you've hed one already and lost her. Maybe the widder 'll soften yet, and then yer can put yer hoss out to pasture."

"Here's that youngster comin' to set with us," said Tarleton. "Howdy-do!"

"How do you do," replied Christopher. "If you don't mind, I'm going to sit down a minute." He seated himself on the top step and laid his crutches beside him. "I'm tired. It's quite a long walk from the farm, and I had to hurry."

"What was yer hurry, kid?" asked Tarleton.

"My name's Christopher, sir," said the boy, "Christopher Lovel."

"Is it? Well, that's interestin'. And what did yer say yer was hurryin' for?"

"I didn't say."

Sam Wilson roared with laughter. "Yer got left that time, Tim," said he.

"I guess yer had an errand up ter Martins," continued Tarleton, quite unabashed; "I saw yer goin' there. What did yer have in yer little basket? Eggs?"

"No, sir," said the boy.

"Milk?"

"No, sir. Where I came from they don't carry milk in a basket."

Sam Wilson slapped his leg in his ecstasy of mirth. Timothy Tarleton removed his pipe. He leaned forward and spoke with emphasis.

"Say, did yer see Mrs. Martin?"

"Yes, sir."

"Was she pleasant spoken or kinder cross?"

"Kind of cross."

Timothy groaned. "Hed anything happened

to put her in a bad humor? I'll bet my bottom dollar Rachel Amy hed been up to something."

Christopher was silent.

"It don't require Rachel Amy to put her in a bad humor," observed Wilson. "If yer go into that, Tim, yer go with yer eyes open, that's one comfort. It ain't safe marryin' widders, specially when they hev money of their own. The money gives 'em a handle and they ain't slow to use it—and the fact that two men has wanted 'em makes 'em think a powerful deal of themselves."

Christopher rose. "I guess I'll be going back now," said he. "It's getting late." He took his crutches and descended the steps. "Goodbye."

"What did yer say yer took 'em in yer basket?" asked Tarleton.

The boy turned and his whole face was dimpled with laughter. "I didn't say," he replied.

He walked away, and a few minutes afterwards the Smith boy, who had passed him when he was with Rachel Amy earlier in the afternoon, came out of the store and followed the same road. Smith carried one or two small packages. He spoke to no one, even the genial Sam Wilson having refrained from greeting him, and he walked hurriedly, with his head bent and his eyes looking at the ground.

IV

THE road from the village to the Toppan farm was destined to be the scene of more than one mishap that afternoon. Christopher had not gone far towards home when he, too, met with an accident. In some way one of his crutches slipped into a hole at the side of the road and he was thrown to the ground. He tried to rise, but there was nothing for him to take hold of, and it was therefore impossible for him to regain his footing. The only thing to be done was to wait for some one to come over the road. This might be a matter of a few minutes or an hour, one could not tell.

In a very short time, however, he saw a boy approaching. It was the one who had passed him and Rachel Amy as they went to the village, the mysterious Smith boy to whom Rachel Amy and her friends were "not allowed" to speak. Chris, sitting by the side of the road, watched him coming. He could not understand why this boy should be considered beneath the notice of other boys and girls. Even if he had not needed

assistance he would have been glad to know him. Christopher had a friendly soul, and in a certain way social distinctions were quite unknown to him. The only thing to be really ashamed of was, it seemed to him, to have no relatives and to have come from a Home. This idea had been growing in his mind ever since his arrival at Maybury. The boy glanced at him and then looked away. He had almost passed when Chris spoke to him.

"I say," said he, "would you mind helping a fellow? I've fallen down and can't get up."

"What's the matter with pickin' yourself up?" asked the other in a surly tone.

"Why, I can't!" exclaimed Christopher, smiling at the larger boy. "Don't you see I've only got one leg? I've got to have something to hang on to. Would you mind giving me your hand?"

Smith muttered an exclamation. "Sure!" said he. "I forgot that." He held out his hand and Christopher pulled himself up.

"Now if you'll hand me my crutches, please. Thank you. I'm glad you came along. I might have had to stay there ever so long if you hadn't."

"Guess you wouldn't have spoken to me if you hadn't wanted to be hauled up," said Smith. Then he walked on.

Christopher hurried after him. "I say, Smith! Smith!" he called out. "Wait a minute. I can't walk so fast. Wait!"

Smith, rather unwillingly, stood still.

"I don't know why you think I wouldn't speak to you except for you to help me," said Chris.

"'Cause nobody does."

"Well, I will. I like to speak to everybody, and as I haven't been here very long I'd be glad to have you for a friend."

"That sounds very well, but you won't keep it up. Anyhow, what do I care? It don't make any difference to me what folks think. I saw you with the Martin girl. She'll set you against me—that is, if she's anything like her mother."

"I don't think she is," said Christopher. "Her mother is the most scolding person I ever saw. I guess she's like her aunt."

"They're—" began Smith, and then stopped abruptly. They walked along in silence for a time, and at last the Toppan farm came in sight.

"What kind of folks live there, do you know?" asked Smith.

"Why, that's where I live," laughed Christopher. "Didn't you know that? At least, I'm living there this summer."

"Would they give a fellow work?"

"I don't know. They have lots of men working there now."

"Well, you needn't ask 'em."

Mr. Toppan was standing by the pump when Christopher and Smith approached the house.

"Good-bye!" called Chris, gayly. The other did not reply, but hurried on.

"Where did you pick him up, Chris?" asked Mr. Toppan, as soon as Smith was out of hearing.

"He picked *me* up!" said Chris, laughing. "I tumbled down and he came along, and I asked him to help me and he did."

"Well, if I was you," said Mr. Toppan, in his drawling voice, "I wouldn't have much to do with that feller. There's something queer about those Smiths."

Mrs. Toppan expressed the same opinion when she heard of Christopher's adventure, and both she and her husband seemed to regret that this boy of all others had been the one to give assistance to Christopher. They also alluded to the mystery which hung about the family, and consequently Christopher's curiosity was very much aroused.

Several days passed by without further adventure. Christopher's life soon settled into regular ways, and soon also he gave evidence that the country air and wholesome food were doing him good. His thin face grew round and

rosy with incredible quickness. He was a perfectly healthy boy, and it had been merely long confinement within doors that had made him pale and thin. Every one loved him at the farm, and had he not been blessed with a sweet and unselfish disposition he might have been spoiled.

"I declare, he's 'most too good to live!" said Mr. Toppan to his wife. "It would be a real relief to me if he'd do something downright bad once in a while."

"He will, sooner or later," replied Mrs. Toppan, "but I must say he's a little angel now. Did you see the General looking at him when he rode by to-night? Chris was out in the road waiting for the General to come. He is very curious about him."

It was true. General Keith possessed for Christopher a fascination second only to that of the mysterious Smiths. Every morning and every evening he took care to be on hand to see him ride by, and at each of those times he longed to speak to the stern-looking person on the horse, but he did not quite know what to say. The General did not appear to be the kind of person to whom a small boy could shout a greeting without encouragement. There were two things about him which appealed very strongly to Christopher. One was that he rode a horse,

the other that he played the violin. He felt that they must become friends, but at present he saw no way to bring it about. He questioned Mrs. Toppan about the General that same night upon which, earlier in the evening, he had waited in the road. She was helping him to get ready for bed.

"Why is the General called General?" he asked.

"Because he fought in the war. He was a great soldier in his day."

"Soldiers kill people, don't they?"

"Yes, they do. But I suppose they have to. Our country wouldn't be what it is if we hadn't had brave soldiers."

"Was General Keith very brave?"

"As bold as a lion, they say."

"I should like to be a soldier and get to be a great general, but I suppose I couldn't with only one leg. Does he live all alone now?"

"All alone except for his house-keeper, Mrs. Adams, and his flowers. He's very fond of flowers, the General is, and he's got beauties. He's very rich, and nobody knows what 'll become of his money when he dies. It 'll go to charities, I suppose, and the town of Maybury. He's not a Maybury man, but he's been coming here summers for a great many years."

"I wish he'd give some money to the Home," said Christopher.

"Well, he might very easily. I guess he don't know what to do with it all."

"Hasn't he any children?"

"No. He had two, a son and a daughter. The son died, and the daughter married a man he didn't like, and now she's dead, they say. Nobody knew much about her after she married, because the General never spoke of her, and of course nobody dared ask him. Mrs. Adams, his house-keeper, comes to see me sometimes, but she says she don't know a thing except she's pretty sure she died. Mrs. Keith died years ago of a broken heart. He broke it, if ever a man did."

This last bit of information made General Keith more interesting to Christopher than ever. He had never heard of a broken heart, and he wondered how the General had been able to break one. He was silent for a few minutes. Then he spoke in a very awe-struck voice.

"Mrs. Toppan?"

"Yes, dearie."

"Does that make General Keith a murderer?"

"Oh no! He didn't realize he was doing it. He's a stern, hard sort of man, and he wasn't able to brook disappointment. You see, his son didn't do well at college, and that was a blow, and then he died just as he was beginning life. Then the General set all his hopes on Emily, and she disappointed him. She had a will of her own, too.

Got it straight from him so he oughtn't to have blamed her. Mrs. Keith never got over his giving up Emily. It was an awful trial. So you see, dearie, rich folks have their troubles as well as the rest of us. Good-night, Chris."

The boy put his arms around her neck as she stooped to kiss him. "I'm glad I'm here with you!" he said, softly.

The next day it happened that Christopher was left very much to himself. Mr. and Mrs. Toppan were obliged to go to a neighboring town to attend the funeral of a relative, and they were to be gone the entire day. They were to drive over, as the trains did not run at convenient hours, so Jerry, the old white horse, was harnessed to the buggy. There were several farm-horses, but they were always hard at work, and it was seldom that even old Jerry was taken out for a pleasure drive during the busy season. To-day it was not a matter of pleasure, but of stern duty, and the farmer rather begrudged giving up the whole day in haying-time. However, it could not be helped, and as long as he was obliged to go he determined to enjoy the drive with his wife. They would have been glad to take Chris with them, but under the circumstances it did not seem best. He was left in the care of Anna, the hired girl, but he was always allowed a certain amount of independence, and as yet he had never

proved unworthy of the confidence which they placed in him.

They drove away with more than one backward glance at the small boy who sat on the front steps and waved his hat in farewell. At last they were out of sight, and he then turned his attention to matters near at hand. There were two things which he was consumed with a burning desire to do. One was to visit the home of General Keith, the other to go to that of the Smiths. He had heard such strange things about them both, little whispers among the men, something Mr. Toppan said to his wife, and a remark made by Anna. Of the two houses he preferred to go to the Smiths', for that family seemed the more mysterious, but after what Mr. Toppan had said, he feared that it would be wrong for him to go there. The same road led towards both houses, until a certain point was reached. There the road forked, the wider and more travelled division on which the General lived leading to West Maybury, the other, narrow, shady, and soon dwindling into a mere lane, being the path which took one through the woods to the Smiths'. After Mr. and Mrs. Toppan had driven away to the funeral, Christopher informed Anna that he was going for a walk. She was busy with her morning's work, and was rather glad to have him amuse himself in his own way, so she

offered no objections and very soon he started in the coveted direction. He was not going really to the Smiths', he told himself, but was merely going to look down their lane, on his way to General Keith's. He did not expect to go inside the gates at the latter place, but intended to look in from the road and see, if possible, the celebrated flowers about which he had heard so much.

It was a beautiful morning in late June. There had been a period of intense heat, but after a series of thunder-storms a day or two before, the weather had changed and it was now cool and delightful, and suggestive of September. The invigorating air filled Christopher with the spirit of enterprise. Usually he passed his mornings in the hay-field, or in the barn, but to-day he was fired with a desire to have an adventure of some kind. Had he been like other children he would have gone off for a day in the woods, or would have played ball or some other boisterous game which required physical exercise. Being lame, his mind had become active and inquiring, and it was busy with the affairs of his interesting neighbors.

He walked rapidly up the road. The only person he met was Mrs. Martin. He had seen her pass the house more than once of late, and he had heard Mrs. Toppan wonder "what took Liza Martin up our road." This morning she was walk-

ing hurriedly. She did not speak to Chris until she had passed him. Then she stopped and called to him.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"I'm just taking a walk," replied the boy.

"Is Mrs. Toppan home to-day?"

"No, ma'am."

"Gone to a funeral?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"I thought so. Well, that's all I want to know."

She hurried on. Christopher wondered why she seemed so pleased at hearing this, or why she had asked at all, but he soon forgot it for he had reached the fork in the road. He stood still and looked both ways. There was a sign-post at this corner. The board was old, and the words upon it had been dimmed by years of weather, but one could still read: "West Maybury, 3 miles. Mayburyville, 5 miles." There was a painted hand pointing up the road, while another hand, pointing in the other direction, indicated that Maybury Centre was one mile away. Maybury Centre was the village which Christopher knew. There was nothing to inform the travelling public as to what was to be found upon the narrow road which led to the Smiths'.

Chris stood still and thought the matter out. It was very quiet. A red-winged blackbird ut-

tered its familiar note in the swamp near by, a little song-sparrow, poised upon the top of an elder-bush, swayed in the breeze and sang its joyous song. Some crows cawed lustily in the distance. The sky was very blue, and the few fleecy clouds seemed to intensify its blueness. It was a glorious summer day.

"I'm going along that lane," said Christopher to himself. "Nobody ever told me not to go along that lane—at least, not in so many words. Mr. Toppan said, 'Don't have anything to do with the Smiths, but he didn't say, 'Don't go along their lane.' It looks nice and pretty there, and I guess there'll be some berries or something nice, and I'll just take a look at the house."

But at that moment he heard the thud of a horse's hoofs.

"It's the General!" he said, aloud. "I'm going to speak to him first before I go."

He waited in the road, his eager face turned towards the village from which the horse was approaching. The General, absorbed in his own thoughts, was startled by the sound of a childish voice.

"Are you General Keith?" Then came a peal of merry laughter. "I know you are, so it's rather funny for me to ask you. My name's Christopher Lovel, and I should like to know

you very much, because you play the violin—and—for other reasons." He did not like to add, "because you ride a horse," for he was afraid it might sound like hinting. He was so anxious to ride a horse himself.

The General started perceptibly. Then he drew up and sat looking down at the boy. His horse was very tall and so was he, and Chris felt very far below the stern, cold face. Still the man said nothing, and the boy felt it necessary to continue the conversation himself.

"I s'pose, sir, you're very much surprised to have me speak to you. I thought I would because there's something I want to do very much, and I thought I'd ask you if I could."

"What is that?"

"I'd like to look at your flowers. Would you mind if I came?"

"No, I should not mind."

"Oh, that's very nice," said Christopher. "I was coming anyway, to look in the gate and see if I could see 'em, but of course it's much nicer to have you say I can come. May I come along now?"

"If you wish."

"Well, I will. I was going to do something else first, but I can keep that till afternoon. You see, Mr. and Mrs. Toppan have gone to a funeral and they've left me at home."

"How does it happen you are living with the Toppans? Are they relations of yours?"

"Yes, sir," replied Christopher, very readily. "They're my aunt and uncle."

He said it almost without realizing what he was doing. It came over him like a flash that here was some one who did not know he was an orphan boy from the Home. All the village knew it and made him the subject of gossip. The General alone was ignorant. To General Keith he could appear to be a boy with a family, with a home, not an unknown waif, the object of the Toppans' kindness and charity. And having uttered the lie without any forethought, he now prepared to stick to it. He looked the General directly in the face, his own big, blue eyes gazing up with apparently the most honest candor.

"I did not know they had any relations by the name of Lovel," said General Keith. "Are you the son of Mr. Toppan's sister?"

"Yes, sir," said Christopher.

"I'm glad you've got such good blood in you. They're all honest people, the Toppans. See that you don't disgrace it."

He spoke to his horse and moved on. "You can come now and look at the flowers," he added.

Christopher followed him up the road. He

felt vaguely uncomfortable. He rather wished that he had not said what was not true. He was not in the habit of lying. In fact, he had no recollection of ever having done so before. He remembered that his father had once said to him, "Chris, always tell the truth," and now he had disobeyed his father. Well, his father would never know it, for he had gone to live in the sky, and of course people who lived in the sky did not know what was going on among people who lived on the earth. Except God. He, too, lived in the sky, they said, and He knew everything. "But then," said Chris to himself, "I don't see why it should make any difference to such a great person as God must be what I say, a little lame boy like me. And it's very nice to have one person in the world think I've got relations. The General never speaks to anybody, so he'll never find it out. I'll let him keep on thinking it, for of course it would disappoint him very much to hear now that I was not really related to such nice kind of people as the Toppans."

He limped quickly along while he was thinking these things, trying in vain to keep up with the General's horse. At last he reached the stone gate-posts which guarded the smooth, hard avenue that led to the house. Here his new friend was waiting for him.

"This is where I live," said General Keith. "Just follow me in."

"It's wonderful," thought the boy. "He's not cross at all. I guess it's because he thinks I'm Mr. Toppan's nephew."

V

FROM the road one could not see the house. A tall hedge hid the grounds from the passer-by, and the trees were thick on either side of the winding avenue. Christopher trudged along until he came to a smooth, green lawn beyond which was a large stone house. He had never seen such a house before. On the front and on one side were broad piazzas with pillars, and on the south side was a conservatory. At a little distance from the house was a great, gleaming roof of glass, which he found afterwards to be a greenhouse. The trees and bushes on the lawn were clipped into curious shapes, the turf was closely cut and was hard and smooth as a board. There were beds of brilliant flowers, and a large rose-garden near made a mass of exquisite color, and filled the air with fragrance.

General Keith had dismounted, and a groom led away the horse while he stood waiting for the boy. Christopher soon came up, somewhat breathless from the long, quick walk. The General looked at him narrowly.

"Where did you come from?" he asked. "Where is your home?"

Christopher hesitated an instant, but only an instant. "I came from—from—the city."

"And you like flowers?"

"Yes, sir."

"Can I trust you to look at them?"

"I don't exactly know what you mean, sir."

"Can I trust you? Will you be careful not to walk on the beds, or pick any, or do any mischief?"

Christopher again hesitated. Then he turned his big, blue eyes on General Keith and looked at him steadily. He remembered that he had spoken a falsehood altogether unexpectedly that morning, and he might do something again that was not quite right. He did not as yet regret the falsehood, for ever since it was uttered he had rejoiced in the knowledge that in the eyes of one person, and that the greatest man in Maybury Centre, he, little Christopher Lovel, was a boy of position and respectable lineage. But he had lied without thinking, and perhaps he should as unexpectedly do wrong again.

"I don't know whether you can trust me or not," said he, at last. "I might feel like picking a flower and then I might do it. I might want to step right into the middle of a bed. There's no knowing what I might want to do."

"But don't you know that people can't always do what they want? Are you accustomed to yielding to every impulse? If so, you have not been well brought up." The old soldier's tone was very severe.

"I am not sure what 'yielding to every impulse' means, but I know I might pick a flower. You see, seeing such a lot of flowers all together makes me feel like jumping and running into the middle of that garden and screaming, it is so beautiful. I guess if you were a little boy like me you'd feel so, too, because you like flowers—only you couldn't run, you know, 'cause you'd be lame. I think, sir, it would be safer for me to sit here and look at 'em."

General Keith said no more. A curious sensation came into his throat, and he felt that he could not quite trust his voice. He went into the house. The boy possessed for him a strange fascination. The upward gaze of his eyes, the smile which came so frequently while he talked, his very voice, suggested to the old man subtle memories of the childhood of his own son and daughter. He had seen little of children since their young days. He supposed all children were alike, and all innocent, blue eyes had a way of gazing into one's very soul, but he felt vaguely troubled. It was hard, he told himself, that one who had met with such bitter disappointment

should be reminded of it by a chance encounter with a farmer's nephew. He shut himself up in his library. An hour later he rang the bell, and a servant came.

"Thomas," said he, "if a little lame boy is still sitting on the piazza steps, ask him if he will have a glass of milk. Come back and tell me."

Presently the man returned. "He's gone, sir. There ain't no sign of him."

General Keith felt distinctly disappointed. His irritation was so surprising to him that he attributed it to another cause. As soon as the man had left the room he laid down his book, and, taking his old garden hat, he went out.

"I've no doubt he did some mischief after all, and then ran away. Oh, he can't run. But he has had plenty of time to get off."

But careful search revealed no trace of any depredations, while an investigation of the gravel on the avenue showed the marks of one foot and two crutches going directly towards the gate.

Christopher had gone home. He had not altogether enjoyed his long-desired visit to Keith Hall, as the place was called. He felt vaguely uncomfortable. In spite of the fact that he was thought to be Mr. Toppan's nephew, the General had not placed any confidence in him, and he had himself acknowledged that he was not altogether worthy of confidence; but the memory of having

told a lie did not trouble him particularly as yet.

When he reached the Smiths' lane he paused a moment, but soon continued on to the farm.

"I guess it's most dinner-time," he said to himself. "I'm awful hungry. I won't go along there now, but I'll go this afternoon, for this is the only day I'll get a chance to. If I went off for so long other days, Mrs. Toppan would ask me where I'd been, and I'd have to tell her."

No thought of speaking anything but truth to Mrs. Toppan occurred to him. He ate his dinner in company with the farm-hands, and when that was over and he had helped Anna wash the dishes, he told her he was again going to walk.

"Where are you going, child?" asked Anna.

"Up the road."

"But you said you went up the road this morning."

"Well, I'm going again."

She finally prevailed upon him to rest for an hour and read, but by three o'clock he was off. He feared that Mr. and Mrs. Toppan might return, and he was anxious to accomplish his object before it should be too late. Anna had gone to her room, the men were all out of the way, there was no one about to ask a question when he set forth once more upon a trip of discovery. Dandy, who had been out in a distant part of

the farm that morning and so had missed the chance of a walk, was with him, running ahead, then returning to walk sedately by his side, seeming to realize that he must adapt his gait to the slower movements of one who was lame.

When they reached the fork in the road, Christopher did not pause an instant. He turned into the lane and very soon he had crossed the bridge over the brook and was in the depths of the cool woods. He walked more slowly now. The tall trees, the soft carpet of pine-needles, the moss-grown rocks, away up the patches of blue sky, and the strange music of the wind as it stirred the tops of the pines, appealed strongly to the child's sensitive nature. He was too young to analyze his emotions, but he felt a mingled joy and sadness, a vague longing, a happy discontent.

After a time he emerged from the woods. The lane was wet and muddy. On the right was a steep and rocky hill, on the left the ground inclined abruptly, and a magnificent view of lake, valley, and hills beyond lay before him. Presently he had turned a curve in the road, and there he saw a house. It was a very small house, little more than a hut. The sloping roof came nearly to the ground, the paint, if ever there had been any, had long since been washed away, the glass in the windows was broken, and in some places

the loss had been supplied by paper, in others, it being summer, the air was permitted to enter. The boy whom Christopher had met on the road was at work in a small bit of garden at the side of the house. A woman sat in a rocking-chair in the shade, and a little girl of nine or ten was playing that she was having a tea-party. On a large, flat stone she had arranged some acorn-cups and a few pebbles, while leaning against it was a doll with no arms and a head from which all trace of hair had long since departed.

Christopher walked slowly by. He hoped the boy would look up from his weeding. Very soon his wish was gratified.

"Hullo!" said Christopher. He had quite forgotten his resolution to say nothing to the Smiths.

"Hullo!" returned the boy, without cordiality, and immediately resumed his work.

The little girl stared at the stranger with unfeigned interest. The woman, who looked very pale and ill, also surveyed him with surprise. Dandy, venturing to make a closer investigation, was ordered to "go home," and Christopher called to him to come. No one spoke to him and he walked on. It was not long before he turned and came back, but in the mean time the Smiths had disappeared. Evidently they had all gone into the house. The empty chair stood there,

the little girl's doll was there, and the boy's hoe, but the persons themselves had vanished.

This surprising discovery made Chris more anxious than ever to see them and speak with them. He walked up to the door and knocked. The door was old and weather-beaten like the rest of the house, and in front of it was a large, flat, irregular stone, dark with age. Weeds grew there in wild confusion, but among them was a climbing rose which clung about the doorway. Christopher, waiting for his knock to be answered, looked at the roses with satisfaction. There was no answer, and presently he knocked again, but with no better result. At last, after repeated poundings, he was forced to give it up. He turned away very regretfully and walked slowly along the lane towards home. He was of a sociable and friendly disposition, and he now wished very much to add the mysterious Smiths to his circle of acquaintances. The very fact of their declining to speak with him made him all the more anxious to bring it about. He seated himself upon a fallen tree and thought over the situation, while Dandy, rejoicing at the opportunity, dug deep holes and burrowed far into the earth, emerging breathless every now and then, his nose covered with rich, brown mould.

While Christopher was sitting there he saw coming towards him the little girl.

She was a small, daintily formed creature of about ten years of age. Her hair was very fair and hung about her face and over her shoulders, but her eyes were brown. She did not see Chris until she was almost in front of him. Then she stopped and turned abruptly.

"Wait," said he, eagerly. "Don't go back. I want to speak to you. I've keen knocking on your door. Why didn't you come to it?"

"Couldn't," said the child.

"Why not?"

"Couldn't."

"Well, I think you're funny people, not to come to the door when a fellow knocks."

"What did you want?"

"Oh, nothing much. I just wanted to get acquainted."

"We're not allowed to get acquainted with anybody."

"Why not?"

"She won't let us."

"Who's she? Your mother?"

The child's face changed. A look almost of anger came over it. "My mother? No, of course not. She."

"But who is she?"

"I'm not allowed to say."

This was certainly very remarkable. It made

the Smiths more mysterious than ever. Christopher resolved to find out more if possible.

"My name's Christopher Lovel," he said. "What's yours?"

"Lucy Smith."

"Lucy's a very pretty name. Don't you want to sit down on this log?"

"No, I'm not allowed."

"I don't see why you say that. You're just like Rachel Amy Martin. She's always saying she's not allowed to—" He stopped, remembering that Rachel Amy was not allowed to speak to these very Smiths. Again the little girl's face changed.

"Are you a friend of Rachel Amy Martin's?"

"Yes, I know her. What's the matter? Where are you going?"

"I'm going home." She was running with flying feet along the lane. In a moment she had turned the corner and was out of sight.

Presently the boy rose and adjusted his crutches and limped slowly homeward.

"They certainly are very queer people," he said to himself. "Why did she run away when I said I knew Rachel Amy?"

He reached the farm just as Mr. and Mrs. Toppan returned from their trip. There was much to be attended to after the day's absence, so no questions were asked as to where he had

been. At supper one of the men remarked that Chris had "made himself real scarce" that day, upon hearing which Mr. Toppan wanted to know what he had been doing.

"I walked up the road to Keith Hall this morning and looked at the flowers," said the boy.

"Did you see the General?"

"Yes, sir, and I talked to him first in the road, and he let me go."

"Well, if that don't beat everything! Did he give you a flower?"

"No, and he told me I couldn't pick any, but as I hadn't s'posed I could I wasn't disappointed, only I'd have liked to."

The farmer laughed. "I guess you would, sonny. If that ain't just like the General, and just like you. Well, I guess he needn't have troubled himself to tell you that. You're honest if ever a boy was."

When Mrs. Toppan was about to leave his room that evening after he had gone to bed, Christopher, who had been very thoughtful since supper, asked her to come sit beside him. He had said his prayers and she had given him the good-night kiss, but she came back willingly enough.

"Mrs. Toppan," he asked, "what's honest?"

"What do you mean, child? Surely you know what it is to be honest?"

"I know partly, but I don't know quite all."

"Well, it means not cheating, not taking money that don't belong to you; if you're a store-keeper it means giving good measure, and if you sell milk, as we do, it means good, full cans and rich milk."

"But for a little boy like me who isn't a store-keeper and doesn't sell milk?"

"It means owning up to anything naughty, and being good, and acting so's we can depend on you when you're out of our sight."

He listened attentively. She had not mentioned speaking the truth always. He supposed a lie that would hurt any one would be what you might call dishonest, but a little, harmless lie, such as saying you were Mr. Toppan's nephew when you weren't could not be very wrong. It was pretending to be something you were not, to be sure, but you did that all the time when you were playing, and he was playing that he was the farmer's nephew. So reasoned Christopher, and decided to say nothing about it to Mrs. Toppan. He would, however, confess his visit to the Smiths.

"I went up the lane this afternoon," said he. "I passed the Smiths' house."

"Did you see any one there?"

"I saw the mother and the boy and the girl, but they all went into the house. Afterwards I saw the girl in the woods. She's very pretty and

her name is Lucy. Why don't people like them, Mrs. Toppan?"

"I don't know exactly, but they have a bad name in the village. But I must go, child. It's getting late."

She kissed him hurriedly and left him. He turned over on his pillow, very glad that she had not forbidden him to go there again, and soon he was asleep.

In the mean time, Mr. Toppan took his usual evening walk to the post-office. As he passed the Martin house in the village, Mrs. Martin called to him, and then came down the path to the gate.

"I s'pose you're goin' over to the office," said she; "and I wish you'd bring back our mail. Lucetta's got one of her headaches, and she can't stir hand or foot. It's real inconvenient for me. Lucetta's headaches always do come just when I least want 'em. I d'know as she can help it, but it seems so. And there's Rachel Amy hurt her foot and *she* can't go. Did you ever know anything like it? And I'm that tired with it all I don't feel as if I could stir. I thought you wouldn't object, as you come right by. I'm not expectin' anything except the *Maybury Times*, but I'd like to have that to read this evenin' and see if I can't divert my mind."

Mr. Toppan promised to do as she asked and

continued on his way. There was a sharp twinkle in his humorous eyes.

"It's awful hard sufferin' for Liza Martin when Lucetta has a headache," he said to himself. "Well, I suppose the Lord has some good reason for makin' so many selfish folk—though I doubt if He has anything to do with it. I guess somebody else has had a hand in that. Tim Tarleton will have a hard row to hoe if he gets in there."

All the village knew of Timothy Tarleton's matrimonial intentions, of which he made no secret. He was at the post-office with a group of villagers when Mr. Toppan joined them. Mr. Parker, the postmaster, could be seen behind the glass window slowly and laboriously sorting the mail, assisted by his son and daughter. Each letter was turned over, examined carefully, stamped by the machine, and then deposited in the proper box. It consumed a vast amount of time to do it in this way, but no one expected or desired it to be accomplished more quickly. There was plenty of time to spare at Maybury Centre, and the sooner the mail opened, the sooner would the most interesting hour of the day be a thing of the past. Finally the newspapers were distributed, and then with a little click the glass window was opened and Mr. Parker's benign face was seen through the wire-grating, ready for the first comer.

It was Mr. Toppan, who upon receiving his own mail, asked for that of Mrs. Martin and Lucetta Smith. There were handed to him a folded newspaper and a postal-card. The postal-card was lying with the address downward, and in such a way that it was impossible to avoid seeing the words upon it, which were written in a large, clear hand. This was what he read: "Have thought it over. Bring more at once or will tell L." There was no signature.

It would have been beyond the power of man—or woman—to resist the temptation to look at the address of this peculiar message, and Mr. Toppan, not being different from other people, turned over the card and read it. It was directed to Mrs. Martin, Maybury Centre, and it was also post-marked Maybury Centre.

"This is kind o' queer," said Mr. Toppan to himself. "It won't do, though, for Liza Martin to know I've read it. I'll tuck the card into the paper and be reading my own letters." Which he did, and when he reached the Martins' he gave Liza her mail and departed, with no further conversation.

Mrs. Martin, who had been waiting for him at the gate, took the paper and went into the house. There was a red cloth on the kitchen-table and a lamp burned brightly. She sat down in the rocking-chair, and, putting on her spectacles, she

opened the paper. The postal-card fell to the floor. She picked it up and read it. She gave a half-smothered exclamation and looked furtively around.

"Well, I'm thankful Lucetta ain't here!" she thought. "For once her headache's come at the right time!" Then she stepped softly and quickly to the kitchen stove, where yet burned some embers. In a moment the postal-card was blazing. She watched until only cinders remained. Then she sank into the rocking-chair.

"What *am* I to do?" she sighed. "There's no end to it. And I wonder if Dan'el Toppan read that card, or the Parkers! I'll teach her not to write postal-cards! I'll teach her!"

She did not read the *Times* that night. After a little while she rose and stood irresolutely by the table. Then she walked with an air of decision to the hooks behind the door where her hat was hanging. She put it on, and going to the kitchen cupboard she lifted down an earthenware jar from an upper shelf, carefully shielding it as she did so by standing between it and the windows. She took from it a five-dollar bill which she placed in her pocket, and put back the jar on the shelf where it belonged. She made a pretence of lifting down and looking into other jars and boxes, even pouring sugar from one re-

ceptacle into another. This was done to deceive possible spectators.

"I'll put out the light," she muttered, "and if Lucetta should take it into her head to come down she'll think I've gone to bed, but it ain't likely."

Then she stepped out into the night.

VI

THERE was another communication of importance in the Maybury evening mail in addition to the postal-card received by Mrs. Martin. This was a letter to Mrs. Toppan. Her husband gave it to her when she came down to the sitting-room after her conversation with Christopher. As she had not a large number of correspondents it was something of an event to get a letter, and she prepared to enjoy the excitement of it to the full. She examined it on all sides, and studied carefully the postmark and the handwriting before she opened it.

"I do wonder who it's from," said she. "It's from New York, Dan'el! Who can it be from?"

"I sh'd think the easiest way of finding out would be to open it," he replied.

"Well, I s'pose it would, but I'd kind of like to guess it before I do that."

However, she finally broke the seal. "Well, I want to know! If this isn't the queerest thing ever was! Dear! Dear!"

She continued to read and to exclaim. Finally Mr. Toppan laid down his paper.

"Look here, Marthy," said he; "I'm not a curious man by nature, and I'm willing you should keep things to yourself if you want to, but I'm pretty sure you don't want to. You're bound to tell me sooner or later, and if you please, I'd admire to have you tell me now what's in that letter, and after that perhaps I can read the *Times* in peace."

"Well, I d'know's you can. After you've heard what's in this letter I sh'd be surprised if you could settle down to the *Maybury Times*. Dear! Dear! Dan'el, do you remember the Hamiltons who boarded with us that summer, about ten years ago?"

"Why, yes, seems to me I do."

"Dan'el Toppan! You remember 'em as well as I do! Well, it seems one of the children needs mountain air. Wait, I'll read you just what she says."

She settled her spectacles more firmly, and with a sharp glance at Mr. Toppan to make sure that he was properly attentive, she read the letter:

"DEAR MRS. TOPPAN,—I wonder if you remember the family who boarded with you ten years ago this summer? We have never forgotten our pleasant visit to Maybury, nor the delicious air and food at Toppan farm.

"I am writing to ask you if you will be willing to

take my sister-in-law and one of my daughters for the months of July and August. Betty, my third daughter, who was the baby when we were with you, is very much in need of mountain air. We are obliged as a family to spend our summers by the sea, near New York, but my sister-in-law, Miss Hamilton, will come with her. I know that you do not often take boarders, but I hope very much that you will again make an exception in our favor. Please let me know at once, for I should like to have them start the end of the week.

"Sincerely yours,

"ELIZABETH HAMILTON."

"Did you ever hear the beat of that!" exclaimed Mrs. Toppan. "I declare it quite takes my breath away."

"Well, I wouldn't do it if you don't feel like it," said Mr. Toppan, in his slow, drawling tones. "There's no need for you to be taking boarders if you don't want to, Marthy."

"Don't feel like it! I never said a word about not wanting to, Dan'el. I'd do most anything to please Mrs. Hamilton. She's one of the nicest ladies ever I met. I suppose her sister-in-law's just as nice. Elderly, no doubt, and willing to lead a quiet life up here. And the little girl's an invalid."

"She don't say so."

"She says she needs mountain air, and that's just the same thing. It 'll be nice for Chris to have her here. I'll give them the large room on

the south side. It's big enough for two beds, and that'll be real handy for them, especially if the child's sick. Well, I wanted a houseful this summer, and seems to me I'm going to have it. I'll write to her right away, and you'll take it to the office to-night, Dan'el, won't you, so it'll start in the early mail?"

The letter was written and Mr. Toppan again walked to the village. Timothy Tarleton, who was lounging on the steps of the post-office, volunteered to accompany him on his return. They had come about half of the way when they saw approaching them the tall, slender figure of a woman. There was no moon, but the stars were very bright, for the night was clear. They saw her first in the open road, but by the time they met her they were in a shady spot where it was dark. Mr. Toppan recognized her, however, and spoke:

"Liza Martin!" said he. "You're out walking kind of late for you."

"Well, I don't know as it's any one's business," snapped Mrs. Martin.

"Why, no!" drawled Mr. Toppan. "I don't know as it is, only I was kind of surprised to see you after being so tired as you informed me you was earlier in the evening. Couldn't even get as far as the post-office!"

"I guess I'll see you home, Mrs. Martin," said

Mr. Tarleton. "I was just about to turn, anyhow, and I'm going your way."

The widow made some inarticulate reply and hurried on, Timothy following at the same pace. Mr. Toppan looked after them.

"I thought it was rather unusual exercise for Tim to be walking home with me," he said to himself. "He must have known she was out walking. But what was she doing here so late, anyhow? Seems to me I've seen her going past the house quite often lately. She's cracked, Liza Martin is. Her temper's made her crazy. Tim Tarleton will have a life of it, but he's going into it with his eyes open."

He told his wife of the incident, and she too remarked upon the frequency of Mrs. Martin's walks in the direction of West Maybury, but her mind was too fully occupied with the coming of the Hamiltons for her to give much thought to the doings of Mrs. Martin.

Christopher was intensely interested the next morning in hearing of the letter from New York. He went away by himself after he had gained all the information about the Hamiltons that it was possible to extract from Mrs. Toppan, and thought the matter over. To have a little sick girl at the farm would be very pleasant. He was so accustomed to sick children at the Home that it would seem natural to be with one again. She

had a very nice name, Betty Hamilton. He had never known any one by the name of Betty. He hoped the aunt would allow her to play with him. Oh, how terrible it would be if she would not! The aunt was probably old, and severe, and strict, and would not approve of lame boys with no relations. If only he were really the nephew of Mr. and Mrs. Toppan! Then all would be so different. A bold idea came to him. He rose from the bench in the orchard, where he had been sitting, and seizing his crutches he hastened towards the house. As he crossed the road he heard the General's horse, so he waited. No one would have suspected from General Keith's face that he, on his part, was anxiously watching for the boy, but such was the case.

"Good-morning, sir!" called Christopher. His voice was blithe and his face was rosy and smiling. The General looked at him almost fiercely. What right had any child to bring back to him the memories that thronged about him at the sound of that voice and the sight of that laughing face?

"Good-morning, sir!" cried Chris again. He was absolutely fearless, and he looked for a cordial response from every one. To him the world was full of friends. It was always a shock to him when he failed to find one, which, however, happened but seldom.

"Good-morning," said General Keith, now reining in his horse.

"I thought your flowers were beautiful yesterday. I'm very much obliged to you for letting me look at them."

"If you come there this morning, I will let you have one or two," said General Keith, very much to his own surprise. Christopher's face, smiling before, now fairly beamed with delight.

"Oh, goody, goody!" he shouted. "I'll come right off. Are you sure you mean it?"

"Quite sure," replied the General, gruffly, and then he rode on.

Christopher went into the house. He had almost forgotten the idea which had caused him to leave the orchard, but when he thought of it, he decided to wait until later in the day. It was to make a request of Mr. and Mrs. Toppan, and as yet he was not sure that he dared do it. To be sure, they were as kind to him as if he were indeed their nephew, but this was to ask what seemed to the boy to be a very great favor.

Mrs. Toppan, busy with her preparations for the new-comers, paused long enough in her labors to ask Chris what he was going to do. She saw him go into his room.

"The General told me to come up to his house," he replied. "He said I could pick one or two flowers."

"I want to know!" exclaimed Mrs. Toppan. "He never was known to do a thing like that before. But what are you going to do with your violin, dearie?"

The boy had hung the case by a strap around his neck.

"I thought I would take it and play to him," said he. "He's so kind that I'd like to do something for him, and as he plays himself he might like to hear me."

"Do tell!" said Mrs. Toppan. And when Christopher had gone, she remarked to Anna that there never was a child like him, to which Anna agreed.

"I only wish he was my own flesh and blood!" sighed Mrs. Toppan.

Christopher found the General on the piazza. He was reading his letters, and he scarcely noticed the boy's arrival. Chris sat down on the piazza steps and opened his violin case. He considered the matter and came to the conclusion that it would not be polite for him to play without being asked, so he laid the fiddle on the step beside him and sat as still as possible, looking out over the broad lawn and the rose-garden. Presently the General gathered up his papers and, without saying a word, went into the house. He seemed to have forgotten that he had invited Christopher to come. The boy waited for a few minutes and then he decided to amuse himself with his violin.

As long as General Keith was not there to be disturbed, there could be no harm in playing. After some preliminary tuning, he began a little air that had been a favorite among his friends at the Home. Very soon he had forgotten the General, forgotten the flowers and his strange surroundings; all that he remembered was the music that filled his soul. He was playing but a simple melody, but he played it with the feeling of a true musician. He did not hear footsteps behind him, and when he had finished he was startled by General Keith's voice.

"Where did you learn to play?"

"I don't know, sir," replied Chris. "I've always played."

"Do you mean you've never taken any lessons?"

"A friend of my father's showed me a little. He was a nice man who went away to Europe, and he gave me his violin when he went."

The General took it and examined it critically. "Hm! Quite a good one. Can you read music?"

"A little."

"Come into the house."

Chris raised himself. "If you don't mind," said he, "will you please take my fiddle? I can't get hold of it now."

They went into the house, the General carrying the violin, the case, and the bow. He led the

way through a great, square hall to his music-room. In this room there were several instruments—a large pipe-organ built into one side of the room, a grand-piano, several violins, and a 'cello, and there were shelves filled with music, both books and sheets. There was neither furniture nor drapery in the room. It was as bare as a public hall, but through an open doorway Chris could see another large room, filled with chairs and tables and pieces of statuary, while the walls seemed to be lined with pictures.

General Keith turned and handed him his fiddle.

"Play me something else," said he.

"I shall have to sit down," said Chris. "You see, I can't lean on my crutches and play at the same time."

"Of course not. I am very forgetful."

He went into the other room and brought from there a low, gilt chair.

"Why, it's gold!" exclaimed Chris. "I never sat in a gold chair before. I feel like a king on a throne."

He leaned the crutches against the end of the piano, and taking his violin from his host he began to play. The General seated himself upon the organ-bench and watched him. When the boy had finished, he said nothing for a minute. Then he rose, and taking his own violin he screwed

"THE GENERAL SEATED HIMSELF UPON THE ORGAN-BENCH AND WATCHED HIM"

it up and tuned it, striking a note on the piano to get the key.

"You play well," said he, at last; "for a small boy who has had so little instruction you do remarkably well. Now I will play for you."

"Oh, good!" exclaimed Christopher. "That's just what I was hoping you'd do."

He sat in rapt attention, his big, blue eyes fixed upon the musician, his face grown pathetic now that the smiles had gone from it. For some reason the General found him an inspiring auditor. He played as he had not played for years. A subtle connection seemed to exist between him and the little lame boy, a secret sympathy which neither could have analyzed, but which was felt by both, and this in spite of the great difference in their ages, their circumstances and their surroundings.

When General Keith laid down his instrument, Christopher gave a deep sigh. "Oh!" said he. "If I could only play like that!"

"You can if you practice. You have it in you. You must take some lessons."

"But doesn't it cost a great deal of money to take lessons?"

"Yes, it costs money."

"Well, you see, I haven't any, so I am afraid I can't do it."

"Your uncle ought to be able to pay for some lessons."

Christopher's eyes turned towards the floor. "No," said he, with some embarrassment, "I'm afraid he can't." Then, after a slight pause, he took his crutches. "I think I must go now."

General Keith helped him put his violin into its case, and then placed the strap around his neck. "Would you like some flowers?" he asked. "We'll get some. You can take them to your aunt."

"No, I thank you, sir," replied the child.

"But that is what you came for."

"I know it, but if you'll excuse me, I won't take any. Thank you for the beautiful, *beautiful* music! Good-bye, sir."

He walked quickly away. The old soldier stood looking after him. Then he sighed so heavily that it was almost a groan, and, turning away, he went into his library and began to read the latest work on military tactics. But it did not prove as interesting as usual, and he spent the remainder of the morning sitting in his arm-chair and thinking, and although the big book lay open on his knee, not a page of it was turned.

Christopher went home. He tried to explain to himself why he had refused the flowers. It had suddenly seemed to him impossible to receive anything from one whom he had deceived.

"He was going to give them to me to take to my aunt, and I haven't any aunt, so of course I couldn't take them," he said to himself. He felt uncomfortable, but he had no thought of going to his new friend and telling him the truth. His conscience was not yet really awakened. He told Mrs. Toppan that he and the General had both been playing on their violins.

"And where are your flowers, dearie?"

"I didn't bring any," was all that he said.

That afternoon a carriage stopped at the gate and a groom brought in a large box addressed to Christopher Lovel. It was filled with exquisite roses, and a card lying upon them bore these words: "Bring your violin again the beginning of the week. I am going away to-morrow for a few days," and it was signed, "Baldwin Keith."

When Mrs. Toppan came down that evening from Christopher's room, she paused for a moment in the sitting-room to wipe her eyes before joining her husband on the piazza. His powers of observation were keen, however, and from behind his paper he soon discovered that she had been crying.

"What's the matter, Marthy?" said he. "Anything gone wrong?"

"Not a thing," she replied, briskly. "What makes you think that?"

"Well, when I see you kind of teary in the eyes, and sort of trembly in the mouth, I naturally suspect that Anna's broken another bit of your grandmother's china, or something else is in the wind. Come, now, Marthy, out with it!"

"Dan'el Toppan, you do beat everything! But this time you haven't hit on the right thing, for all you think yourself so smart. I know I'm teary, but it's not trouble. It's that child. He's twined himself round my heart so firm that I don't see as I shall ever be able to give him up. I was sitting on the big sofa up in his room, and he came and sat side o' me and took hold of my hand, and then he looked up in my face with those great eyes of his, and he said: 'Mrs. Toppan?' and I said, 'What is it, Chris?' s'I. 'I wish I had some relations,' said he. 'So do I, Chris,' s'I, 'but as long as you haven't, you'll have to think of us as if we was relations,' s'I. 'Well,' said he, 'that's just what I was going to ask you. Could I call you and Mr. Toppan aunt and uncle?' 'Of course you can,' s'I. And then he put his arms round my neck and hugged me. 'Then I can pretend you're my real relations,' s'he. 'You see, it's real hard when a fellow hasn't got any. I wish I was really and truly your nephew, but this will be next best.' I declare, Dan'el, it made me feel ready to cry. I was so happy and so sorry, all at once. Do you suppose he hasn't got

anybody in the world belonging to him? Tell me again what they said at the Home."

"They said that as far as they could find out there warn't anybody. His father and mother were dead, that they knew for a certainty. He was wearing round his neck, when they picked him up after the accident, a gold wedding-ring on a cheap little chain, and they've kept that at the Home. He said his father put it on his neck and told him he was going to tell him more about it as soon as he felt stronger, and that it was his mother's, and that he was going to write it all out, but the father died suddenly at the end, although he'd been sick a good while, and never told him. He asked 'em at the Home to keep it for him till he came back."

Mrs. Toppan rose and walked to the end of the porch. Then she came back and stood beside her husband.

"Dan'el," she said, "don't speak of his going back. I can't give him up. I tell you now, plainly, I can't give him up."

Mr. Toppan puffed thoughtfully at his pipe, but said nothing.

VII

THE last day of waiting had dragged itself nearly away. The Hamiltons were to arrive on the half-past five train that afternoon. The great room was ready, and Christopher had himself placed in it for the little invalid a pretty pitcher filled with the Keith roses, which were still fresh and beautiful. There were new muslin draperies at the windows, a large chair had been brought up from one of the rooms down-stairs, and a comfortable, old-fashioned lounge, covered with chintz, that usually stood in Mrs. Toppan's room, had been moved in.

"In case she or her aunt wants to rest," said Mrs. Toppan, "and they might not care to lie on the bed. Our four-posters are so high, it would take all their strength to climb up. I'm getting kind of anxious, anyway, in case they're sick here."

Mr. Toppan went to meet them at the train, and Timothy Tarleton had already been engaged to bring them to the house. Mrs. Toppan, in her best afternoon dress, and Christopher, in the new linen suit recently bought for him at the depart-

ment store in the next town, sat on the piazza. Mrs. Toppan had her knitting and Christopher his book, but after they heard the whistle of the approaching locomotive resounding among the hills, neither knitting nor book had received much attention.

"There!" exclaimed Christopher. "I hear them coming over the bridge!"

A few minutes later the carriage came in sight, and very soon it stopped before the door. Mr. Toppan was on the front seat with Timothy. On the back, looking eagerly out at the farm, were the Hamiltons, aunt and niece. Instead of the elderly lady and the invalid whom Mrs. Toppan had been expecting, there stepped from the carriage a girl of about twenty-five, in a gray travelling suit and a big black hat, and a younger girl of ten or eleven, who seemed the incarnation of life and good spirits. Christopher, standing a little in the background, felt an odd mixture of disappointment and delight. There was nothing to remind him of the children at the Home. This small creature, daintily dressed in blue linen, with a pretty straw hat on her short, bobbing, red curls, was very unlike his little invalid friends.

"How do you do, Mrs. Toppan," said the elder of the two. "We are so glad to get here!"

"But your aunt?" exclaimed Mrs. Toppan.

"Your mother wrote me that your aunt was coming."

"Oh no! Not *my* aunt. You have gotten us wrong. I am the aunt of Betty. I am Mr. Hamilton's sister."

"Well, I want to know! You're the youngest-looking aunt that ever I saw! And where's the little sick girl?"

"Here she is, if you can call her that. She hasn't been really ill, you know, only a little run down, and the doctor thought she ought to have a change of air."

"Well, I never was so surprised!" said Mrs. Toppan. "But come right up-stairs to your room, for you must be tired after your long journey. This is Christopher Lovel," she added, as they moved towards the door. "He's spending the summer with us. He'll be somebody for Betty to play with."

"That is nice," said Miss Hamilton, shaking hands with the boy. "We were hoping she would find a playmate."

Betty flashed a glance at him from under her dark lashes, and gave a funny little smile. Then she walked demurely into the house.

Christopher looked after her. He had never seen a child like her, except those who were walking on one of the fine avenues in the city, one Sunday afternoon when he and his father had

walked there long ago. She was very different in appearance from Rachel Amy Martin, or from the little Smith girl, and as for his friends at the Home—alas! there was indeed a vast difference! And she was to spend the summer at the farm and be his playmate. It was all very wonderful.

He was on the porch thinking about it, and listening to the gay voices that floated down from the windows above, when he saw Rachel Amy coming up the road. They had not met for some time, as Rachel Amy had hurt her foot, and Christopher, having made one effort to go to see her, had been so repulsed by Mrs. Martin that he had been afraid to venture a second time. He went to meet her now. "Is your foot better?" he called out.

"Yes," said Rachel Amy, "it's better, but it ain't well yet."

"Are you coming to the farm?"

"No, I'm going on beyond."

"Where to?"

Rachel Amy hesitated.

"Where are you going?" repeated Chris.

"I guess I'd better not say."

"Why not? Did your mother tell you you mustn't?"

"She told me not to tell Aunt Lucetta, and I guess it's a secret."

"Well," said Christopher, "I don't so very

much care, Rachel Amy. We've got some new people at our house. They've come to stay all summer. One's grown up. She's the aunt, but she's not at all old, and the other is about as old as I am. She's very pretty. She has red hair."

"I shouldn't think anybody with red hair would be pretty," replied Rachel Amy, tossing her dark braid.

"Oh, but she is," said Chris, emphatically; "you just wait till you see her. If you watch that window up there, the middle one, maybe you'll see her now. She was looking out a minute ago."

"I don't know as I care to," said Rachel Amy. "I've got to hurry." And she walked on.

She felt distinctly disappointed. If Christopher had urged her to do so, she would have confided to him her errand. The very fact that her mother had impressed upon her the necessity for keeping it from her Aunt Lucetta had made her long to tell some one else. Christopher would be the very one. She had decided already that she would tell him upon his second asking, if she had any conversation with him when passing the farm. He had manifested no curiosity whatever, all his interest apparently being centred in a red-haired girl. The village had heard of the coming of boarders to the farm, and Rachel Amy, as well as others, had been curious to see them, but she

would not acknowledge this to Christopher after his own provoking indifference.

She walked quickly on without a backward glance. When she reached the fork in the road, she turned down the lane, which she followed until she reached the Smiths' cottage. The little girl, Lucy, was sitting on the steps with her doll. The boy was filling a pail at the pump. Rachel Amy pulled out a letter from a little bag she wore at her side. She laid it on the step beside the child and turned away.

"What's this?" asked Lucy Smith.

"It's for your mother. I'll tell you that, but you needn't ask anything more, for I'm not allowed to speak to you."

"You needn't be afraid, for I'm not allowed to speak to you," returned the child; "and I'm glad I'm not, for I think you're horrid!"

"Lucy!" said a voice from within; "bring me the letter and be quiet."

Rachel Amy paused a moment when she reached the edge of the wood and looked back. The boy and girl had both gone into the house. She wondered very much why her mother should write letters to a family like the Smiths, with whom she was not permitted to have the slightest intercourse. Then she walked home again. When she passed the Toppan farm she saw no one. She supposed that they were all at supper. She

quickened her steps, being hungry herself, but she was otherwise not anxious to get home, for her aunt Lucetta had gone away for a few days, and it was never as pleasant at home when she was absent.

In the mean time, Mrs. Toppan had showed the new-comers to their room.

"It is perfectly lovely," said Miss Hamilton. "I know we are going to be very happy here. You see, I have had a very gay winter in New York, and I am so tired that the doctor said I must have a quiet summer, and my brother proposed my coming here with Betty, instead of making all the visits I had planned for, so I have given up everything, and have brought a lot of books and work, and Betty and I are going to have a good time together."

"It's very quiet here for city folks," said Mrs. Toppan, "but the air's good, and we'll try to make you comfortable. I guess it would be nicer for you to take your meals by yourselves, so I've fixed a table in the sitting-room. We have so many farm-hands now it makes a good many at our table. I'll have Anna wait on you, and you'll have it all to yourselves."

"Where does the little lame boy eat?" asked Betty.

"Oh, he eats with us, of course."

"I'd like to have him with us," said Betty.

"Perhaps Mrs. Toppan would rather not," said her aunt.

"But I want him!" exclaimed Betty, with the air of expecting that to settle it.

"Wait a bit," said Mrs. Toppan. "Wait till you've been here a little while." Then she left the room.

Betty felt very indignant. "I want that little lame boy to eat his meals with us," said she; "and I mean to have him. I shall ask him if he wouldn't rather. Is he her little boy?"

"No, she has no children, but I heard him call her 'auntie.' He must be her nephew."

Presently the supper-bell rang, and they went down to the sitting-room, where a round table was arranged with places for two.

"Where's that little lame boy?" demanded Betty of Anna, who waited on them.

"He's out in the barn, I think," said Anna.

"Why doesn't he come to supper?"

"Oh, he's had his. We're all through in the kitchen."

"After this he's got to be with us," said Betty, with decision. "Is he Mrs. Toppan's nephew?"

"Oh, dear, no! He's a little boy from a Home in the city. He's only spending the summer here. But he's a little angel if ever there was one."

"There!" said Betty to her aunt, when Anna had left the room. "I knew he was something

interesting. I shall ask him all about life at the Home. It must be very nice to come from a place like that instead of a plain, ordinary, every-day house like ours, don't you think so, Aunt Edith?"

"I can't say I do, and if you were to try it you would soon find out how different it would be."

"Of course it would be different, but that is just what I should like. I do love variety!"

"Betty, don't be a goose! You are talking about something of which you are absolutely ignorant."

"I always thought, Aunt Edith, that you were a very snubby person, and now I'm sure of it," said Betty, with an injured air.

Her aunt laughed. "I don't mean to be, but some small children need a certain amount of snubbing."

Betty looked at her, nodding her head so vigorously that her curls bobbed. "I am not surprised, Aunt Edith, that you have never married. You haven't got much more time, for I know you are twenty-five, which is a very elderly age, but if you want to marry, you'd better look out. I don't believe Mr. Lewis would like to be snubbed even by you."

Her aunt, instead of reproving her, laughed again, and Betty forgot her injured dignity and laughed with her. Then she ran around the table and threw her arms around Edith's neck.

"You are the dearest aunt anybody ever had, and I sha'n't let you marry Mr. Lewis or anybody else, for you've always got to live with me."

"We'll see. According to what you said just now there's no danger that anybody will want me."

"I am afraid I was mistaken," said Betty. "You are so pretty and so very fascinating that I am afraid they will. Gertrude Clark and I were discussing the other day which we would rather be, pretty or fascinating, and we both decided it was better to be fascinating, and you know you are both."

"Thank you," said Edith, still laughing. "I didn't know it, and am immensely flattered by your opinion."

They did not see Christopher again that night. For some undefined reason he kept out of the way of the new-comers. They went to their room early, for they were tired from their long journey, and it was necessary for Miss Hamilton to do some unpacking. Christopher heard their voices from his room, for it was long before he could sleep — so many exciting and delightful things had come into his life within the last few weeks. He wondered if it would be necessary to tell that wonderful little girl with the shining hair that he had no relations.

The next morning he was at the pump getting

some water when she came out of the house. She immediately came towards him.

"Hullo!" said she.

"Hullo!" said Christopher, but very shyly.

"Please give me a drink."

He rinsed out very carefully the cup that always rested on the top of the pump. Then he filled it and handed it to her. As she drank she surveyed him over its tin brim. She emptied it and returned it to him.

"That was very good. Now I should like you to show me the hens, and after that everything there is to be seen on the farm."

"I can show you something better than hens," said Christopher, eagerly, forgetting his shyness.

"What is it?"

"An oven-bird's-nest. You know they're very hard to find. It's in the pasture. I found it just by chance. Did you ever see one?"

"Never!" exclaimed Betty. "Let's go right away. What fun!"

It was not long before they were the best of friends. When Chris found that Betty already knew of his origin, and that she did not think any the less of him for it, he told her about his life at the hospital and the Home, and Betty listened with absorbed and flattering interest. She decided, however, that it would not be desirable to exchange her own happy life for that of a lame

or invalid child. They were sitting on a rock in one of the fields when they had this conversation. It was a hot day, but a gentle breeze blew across the meadow, and a clump of trees shaded them from the sun.

"I suppose you have got a great many relations," said Christopher, after a short pause.

"Oh yes! Loads and loads of them. I've got two grandmothers and two grandfathers and three aunts and five uncles and ten first cousins, besides my father and mother and two sisters and two brothers."

Christopher stared at her, his blue eyes wide with amazement.

"How wonderful!" he exclaimed. "I've only got a pretend uncle and aunt! Not one real relation in the whole world. Aren't you very, very happy about it?"

"Why, I don't know," said Betty, considering the subject. "I never have thought whether I was or not. I suppose I am. You see, I've always had all those relations. Sometimes I think it would be nicer not to have so many brothers and sisters and cousins. There's such a crowd of us, you know. We have to take turns doing things. If there were only one of us, and I were that one, I might have everything just as I wanted it, and not have to give up anything."

"Well," said Christopher, "I think I'd rather

give up a few things I wanted if I could have some people that would kind of look out for me and love me because I belonged to them, and not just because they were sorry for me because I only have one leg. I used to hear the visitors at the Home saying it was such a pity I got hurt and hadn't any relations, and then they'd look sorry at me. Of course, I'm rather glad I got run over and got taken to the hospital, because that way I got away from that man I lived with, but still—"

"It would be nice if we could divide up, and I could give you half my grandmothers and grandfathers and cousins and keep half myself."

Both children laughed at this plan, and after that their conversation took a lighter turn, and before very long they returned to the house. Betty went straight to Mrs. Toppan, whom she found in the kitchen. She seated herself in a chair at the end of the table, and watched in silence for a few minutes the preparation of the dinner.

"Christopher Lovel is a very nice boy," she said, at last.

"That he is, my dear," said Mrs. Toppan. "I'm very glad you've found it out."

"It's a pity he hasn't got any relations when he wants them so much. Will you allow him to take his meals with us?"

"Is your aunt willing?"

"Why, of course!" said Betty. "My aunt likes anything that will make me happy."

"Very well," said Mrs. Toppan, "if she's willing, I am."

"Thank you," said Betty; "that's all I wanted."

"What a child!" said Mrs. Toppan to herself, after Betty had left the kitchen. "I s'pose she has everything just as she wants, right straight along. Seems to me things ain't divided even at all, but I s'pose it's all right, and we'll find out sometime why it's so. There! I hear Chris playing his fiddle to them. He may be unfortunate in some ways, but he has the gift of making folks love him, and I don't know but what that's better than great possessions, or having two legs to walk on."

It was true that the boy was blessed with this power. Edith Hamilton, as well as Betty, soon became much interested in him, and not only encouraged him to be with them constantly, but suggested that the children should have lessons together, which she would teach them. Betty did not approve of this plan. She preferred an uninterrupted holiday, but Christopher was much pleased, and every morning an hour and a half was devoted to the task. He was far behind Betty, for he had had but little schooling, but he was anxious to learn, and he proved to be a

quick scholar. He soon developed a devotion to Miss Hamilton that was second only to that which he felt for Mrs. Toppan. His feeling for Betty was different. He looked upon her as he would have looked upon a fairy, who by some marvellous miracle had come to live with them. A creature of another world, charming, incomprehensible, always doing or saying unexpected things, and, in fact, a being quite apart, who for some strange reason condescended to play with him and to be his friend. But Mrs. Toppan and Miss Hamilton were two kind ladies who loved him and were good to him, and he longed for some way of showing to them his gratitude.

VIII

THE first Sunday that the Hamiltons spent at Toppan farm was clear and very hot. There was a Sunday quiet over the place which had been noticeable from the moment they awoke. Even the village cows, when they were driven to pasture, walked more sedately than on the other six days of the week, for the bell had been removed from the leader for the day. The birds sang as usual, to be sure, but they became silent after the early morning. The locusts' shrill song served to intensify the stillness and the heat.

Old Jerry was harnessed into the carry-all, and all the family went to church. On the back seat were Mrs. Toppan and Edith Hamilton, while Betty and Christopher sat in front with Mr. Toppan. Chris was allowed to drive, which he had learned to do since he came to the farm.

There was but one church in Maybury Centre. It stood upon a hill and was painted white. It was at the farther end of the village, and they passed groups of people dressed in their "Sunday best" and walking decorously to church. As

they drove by the Martins' house Mrs. Martin and Miss Lucetta, with Rachel Amy, were just coming out of the gate.

"Who's that girl?" asked Betty.

"That's Rachel Amy Martin," replied Chris, eagerly. "You know I told you about her. She's real nice."

"She has a very queer name," said Betty, looking back over her shoulder. "I shouldn't care to be named Rachel Amy. I'd rather be just Amy. I don't see how she can be nice with such a name?"

"Why, I don't see how that can make any difference," said Chris, wonderingly.

Mr. Toppan chuckled. "If that ain't a woman all over!" said he. "Chris, my boy, by the time you're as old as I am, you'll have found out that women-folk are as full of notions as a pod is of peas. You can't help it, and there's no use trying to combat 'em."

Chris remembered that Rachel Amy had objected to Betty because of the color of her hair, and he felt that Mr. Toppan was right.

The day was so hot and the sermon was so long that Betty found it difficult to keep from falling asleep. A big fly buzzing and beating against the window interested her for a time, but that, too, had a lulling effect. But suddenly she became very wide awake. Directly in front of her

sat Mrs. Martin, very stiff and fine in a silk dress, in which she seemed to take great satisfaction in spite of the heat. Along the back of the pew crept a large, furry, yellow caterpillar. Betty watched it. She peeped around Mrs. Toppan to see if Christopher saw it, and she found that he, too, had discovered it. Would it crawl up Mrs. Martin's silken back? Betty was beside herself with excitement. Slowly the caterpillar pursued its course, reached the silken back, and wended its way slowly but surely to Mrs. Martin's neck. She put up her hand quickly and seized it, and Betty laughed aloud. It was dreadful, she knew, and she had never in her life laughed in church before; but she really could not help it. Every member of the congregation heard her, and was of course greatly shocked. Mrs. Martin looked around, fully convinced that the little city girl in the Toppan pew was responsible for the caterpillar. Rachel Amy's face showed how horrified she was, while Mr. and Mrs. Toppan looked very grave, and Miss Hamilton laid her hand so firmly on Betty's arm that she said, very audibly, "Ouch! you hurt!" Worst of all, the minister paused in his sermon and looked straight at the Toppan pew. Betty longed to laugh again, but by a violent effort she controlled herself.

There was no time to reprove her after the service was over, for Sunday-school was held at

once. All the children were expected to attend, and Christopher had been very regular. He was in a class of boys, and Betty was placed with some girls, among whom was Rachel Amy Martin. The two children exchanged a long and steady stare. Then Rachel Amy turned her back slightly. This displayed her long, smooth, dark braid of hair. Betty changed her place and sat next to her. Her face was demure, but her eyes danced.

"You've got very thick hair," she whispered.

"Yes," said Rachel Amy, forgetting for a moment the affair of the caterpillar, "and there's eighteen twists in my braid."

A few minutes later she was sure her braid was tweaked. She looked around hastily, but Betty, holding her hymn-book with both hands, was singing "From Greenland's Icy Mountains" with such fervor that her curls shook. She apparently did not even see Rachel Amy. When they were questioned in the Shorter Catechism, which was used in this Sunday-school among the hills, Rachel Amy answered, very readily, but Betty, when her turn came, could not say a word.

"You're asking the wrong thing," said she. "I never in my life heard of the 'Whole Duty of Man.' I don't see much use in asking us girls such a question, anyhow, for we'll never be men if we live for a thousand years. What I do know

is 'What - is - your - name - en - or - em - who - gave - you - this - name - my - sponsors - in baptism - wherein - I - was—'" She rattled it off in a monotonous tone until she was interrupted.

"That's enough," said the teacher. "I don't know where you were brought up, little girl, not to know the Shorter Catechism."

"It's not so very short, I think," said Betty. "If that's the shortest, what is the longest? It must be as big as a Bible. And I was brought up in New York."

The teacher felt that it would be wiser to say no more. She had always had the impression that New York was a wicked city, and for a child of ten to come from there who laughed in church and was ignorant of the Shorter Catechism, only served to prove that this was true, but she presently found, to her surprise, that Betty could say any one of the Ten Commandments without a moment's hesitation, and she was also quite familiar with parts of the New Testament. She was again greatly shocked, however, when, in the pause that followed the ringing of the bell which told the scholars to put away their lessons, Betty's voice was heard, audible to the whole room.

"Well, I'm mighty glad *that's* over! I don't think I'll come again, so you needn't put my name down in the book."

Of course all the boys and girls tittered. Christopher, for the second time, was much embarrassed, and Rachel Amy felt a sudden conviction that it was really Betty Hamilton who had tweaked her braid. Until now she had been doubtful.

The older members of the family had gone home in the carriage, and the two children walked back together. Although the day was so hot, it was shady nearly all the way.

"What did you say that so loud for, Betty?" asked Christopher.

"Because I thought they might as well all know it," said she. "I don't care for them at all, and I'm not going again."

"I am. I like it there. The minister shakes hands with me every Sunday, and he has such a kind face. And the teacher's 'most as nice. I never went to Sunday-school before, and I just love the hymns."

Betty looked at him half in wonder, half in pity. "You like such queer little things," she said. "It takes so little to please you. The idea of caring whether a person shakes hands with you every Sunday! But that Rachel Amy Martin is a very proud person, Chris. She told me her braid had eighteen twists in it."

"I think I like short, curly hair best," said Chris.

"Do you?" Betty looked distinctly pleased, and she felt that she could afford to be more gracious. "Oh, well, of course Rachel Amy is probably a very nice girl, although stuck up about her braid. This is where she lives, isn't it? We might go to see her some day."

"I guess her mother thought you put that caterpillar on her neck."

"Well, I didn't, but I was very glad it went there."

"It was dreadful for you to laugh out loud in church, Betty."

"I suppose it was, but when funny things happen what are you to do? The only way I could stop myself was to think very hard about going to the dentist's. I just had to imagine I had an awful pain in my tooth, and that stopped my laughing. But there are some people I want you to tell me about. I mean those Smiths. Were they in church?"

"No, they don't come to church. That's the reason why people think they're queer."

"But they live so far away," said Betty; "and you said the mother was sick."

"I know, and they're so poor they haven't got very nice things to come in—nice clothes, you know."

"Well, I think most of the people in this village are perfectly nasty. I'm going to see those Smiths. Will you show me the way?"

"Oh, I think you'd better not!" exclaimed Christopher. "The minister's been there twice and they wouldn't open the door. They pretended they weren't home. He's going again, though. I heard him telling Mr. Toppan about it. You'd better not go there."

"We won't tell anybody till we've been there, and then you just see if Aunt Edith isn't crazy to go see them herself. She loves to do things for people, and she *loves* interesting mysteries like the Smiths. Oh, isn't it hot? Do you suppose we could ever get a boat and go out on the lake?"

"I don't know how to row," said Chris.

"Oh, I do. It's as easy as anything. I'll show you how and you'll soon be able to do it. We won't go to-day, because it's Sunday, but we will to-morrow, if we haven't anything else to do."

"It costs a lot of money to hire a boat. Timothy Tarleton lets them, and it is at least a quarter of a dollar an hour."

"That's nothing," laughed Betty. "I call that very cheap."

Christopher was silent. To him it seemed a large sum.

That afternoon he was reading on the side porch when Betty came tiptoeing around the corner of the house.

"I thought you had to take a nap," said he.

"Hush!" she replied, in a loud whisper. "I've run away. Aunt Edith is sound asleep in our room. I'm tired of resting, so I wrote on a paper and pinned it on my pillow. She'll find it when she wakes up and begins to look for me. I wrote on it in great, big letters: 'Cannot sleep. Must have fresh air. Will return when I'm ready. Do not be frightened.' I had an awful time spelling 'frightened.' I never know which comes first, the *h* or the *g*, in words like that. Now come along. We'll go right away."

"Go where?"

"To see the Smiths, of course."

"Oh, Betty!"

"You needn't 'Oh, Betty' me. Of course I'm going. Aunt Edith's asleep, and Mr. and Mrs. Toppan are sitting in big chairs in the sitting-room, with their mouths wide open and giving great snorts. Oh, they look so funny!" She was struggling to suppress her laughter, her face crimson with the heat and her amusement. "Come, Chris, come!"

He did not attempt to argue the matter further. He took his hat from the hook in the hall, moving very quietly so that he should not disturb the slumbering household, and presently the two children and Dandy were walking up the road.

"They won't talk to us," said Chris; "you see

if they don't go right into the house as soon as they see us coming."

"You just leave it to me," said Betty. "I'll manage it. I'm crazy to see them. These are splendid woods, Chris. We might come here to play, and invite Lucy Smith to play with us. It's the greatest fun to get some new kinds of children. You're not a bit like the boys I know in New York."

"How am I not?" asked Chris, wistfully. He so longed to be like other boys. "Is it because I'm lame?"

Betty hesitated. She was kind-hearted to those whom she liked, although rather too careless of the feelings of those whom she did not like. She would not have hurt Christopher for the world.

"Oh no!" she replied. "Not that at all, but you know city boys are different from country boys."

"But I'm not a country boy. I've lived in a city ever since I can remember. But—I think I know what you mean. I suppose fellows that live in big houses and have fathers and mothers who have a great deal of money are different from me. But I'll tell you something, Betty, if you'll promise never to tell. Will you promise?"

"Of course I will! I always did love secrets."

"On your honor?"

"On my honor."

"I think from something my father said to me once that we weren't always poor. And he told me never to forget something."

"What was that?" asked Betty, eagerly.

"He said, 'Chris, I'm a very poor man now; we've fallen very low, but there's one thing I want you to remember: never forget you're a gentleman by birth.' Exactly what is a gentleman, Betty? I don't see how I can be one when I'm so poor and lame, and belong in a kind of orphan asylum, and have no relations, do you? Aren't gentlemen always rich?"

Betty considered the matter for a moment before she replied. "My mother explained that to us once," said she, at last. "My brother Charlie and I were naughty, and then we told a story about it. She believed what we said, and then she found out we hadn't been speaking the truth. Mother felt dreadfully about it. She said that a real gentleman or a real gentlewoman always speaks the truth, and doesn't deceive in any way, and is kind to others, and tries to do some good in the world, even if it is only a small thing, and she said, then, that being gentlemen and ladies didn't depend so much on being rich society people as it does on having the right kind of feelings, and if we had good fathers and mothers and grandfathers and grandmothers, who lived good lives and were gentle people, that

we ought to do the same, and live up to their ideals as well as have ideals of our own."

"What are ideals?" asked Christopher.

"I had to ask mother that very question. She always explains beautifully. I can't do it nearly as well, but it means having in your mind a very beautiful image of what you want to be, a kind of picture. Wanting to be very good, you know, and honest and truthful and not deceitful in any way. Trying to be the very best kind of a person, only, of course, not being conceited about it. I hate people who think themselves better than anybody else, don't you?"

"I don't think I know anybody who does."

"Oh, I do! And you know her, too. That Rachel Amy feels that way."

"You don't like her a bit, do you?"

"No; to tell you the truth, I can't bear her."

"Why not?"

"Oh, I don't know. There are lots of people I don't like. Mother says I've got to get over it. That is one of my ideals: to be a very lovely person who likes everybody, and who is adored by everybody. But I don't think I shall ever be like that; it's too hard work."

They now came out of the wood and into view of the Smiths' house. As when Christopher had been there before, the mother sat in a chair at the side of the house where it was shady, and the

"'GOOD-AFTERNOON,' SAID BETTY. 'WE'VE COME TO CALL ON YOU'"

little girl sat near. She had an old and well-worn book in her lap, from which she was reading aloud in a slow, halting way, spelling the words which she did not know. She was so absorbed in this that she did not notice the approach of the children, and as the mother was sitting with her back towards the woods, Chris and Betty were close to them before they were seen. The boy was not there.

"Good-afternoon," said Betty. "We've come to call on you."

Mrs. Smith turned her head quickly. Lucy looked up from her book and stared at the newcomers. Her eyes reminded Betty of Rachel Amy's, round and dark and unflinching in their gaze.

"You may not know us," continued Betty. "My name is Betty Hamilton, and his is Christopher Lovel, and we're spending the summer at the Toppan farm. I think your name is Smith, isn't it?"

"Yes," said the woman, almost against her will. Her voice was low and weak, and her face showed the marks of much suffering.

"Well, Mrs. Smith, we have come to tell you that we want to be friends with you," said Betty, in her most affable manner. "If you're willing, we'll come to see you very often, and we'd like to play with your little girl."

"Does your mother know you've come here?" asked Mrs. Smith. Her voice was now bitter. "People don't care to have much to do with us, you know."

"My mother is 'way off at Sea Girt, but she wouldn't mind, I am sure; and poor Chris hasn't got any mother."

"He's been here before," said Mrs. Smith, "and I sh'd think he'd know that we don't care much about seein' folks."

"I thought you didn't, but I thought I'd try again in case I was mistaken," said Christopher, with his most friendly air.

Mrs. Smith glanced at him. Then, seeming to be attracted by his face, she looked again.

"Where did you come from?" she asked.

"From the city."

"Got any relations there?"

"No," said Chris, blushing painfully. "I haven't any relations anywhere. I wish I had. I came from a Home."

"We've got some we don't like," said Lucy. It was the first time she had spoken.

"Hush, Lucy!" said her mother. "Remember what I said."

After that Lucy did not speak again.

The children stayed for some time, seated upon an old bench that stood by the house. There were long silences which Mrs. Smith made no

effort to break. Christopher also was silent, and Betty found it difficult to keep up the conversation by herself. She was just making up her mind that it was time for them to leave, when she saw Mrs. Smith's head fall helplessly to one side.

"What's the matter with your mother, Lucy?" she exclaimed.

Lucy turned quickly, and then sprang to her mother's side.

"Run, get the medicine!" she said. "It's on the shelf in the kitchen, and some water and a spoon. Hurry!"

Betty ran into the house. She found the bottle, and a cup and spoon beside it. By the time she returned she found that Mrs. Smith had opened her eyes and was looking more natural. The little girl gave her the medicine, and almost immediately her mother raised herself in the chair.

"I must get into the house," she said, feebly. "Where is George?"

"You know he's gone off into the woods, mother," said Lucy, speaking as an older person would to a child. "Perhaps he'll be back soon. Can't you wait?"

"Couldn't I help?" asked Betty. "My father leaned on me walking round the room when he had been sick last winter, and was getting better. I'd love to help!"

Her face was full of sympathy and kindness.

"We can try," said Mrs. Smith. "I must get into the house."

"Don't you want me to go for the doctor?" asked Christopher. He longed to be of use.

"Oh no!"

It seemed to surprise them that it should even be suggested. Mrs. Smith rose to her feet, and with her hands on the shoulders of the two little girls she walked slowly into the house. In a forlorn-looking room, on the opposite side of the little entry from the kitchen, was a bed upon which she lay down.

"Now go," she said to Betty. "I thank you, but please go. It won't do for you to be found here."

"What does she mean?" asked Betty of Lucy.

"I can't tell you," said Lucy. "I wish you could stay."

"Go!" said Mrs. Smith again. "She'll come, Lucy. I'm sure she'll come to-day. Make the children go."

IX

BETTY and Christopher started for home full of excitement about their experiences at the Smiths', and of curiosity as to the person whose coming was of so much importance.

"It must be a woman," said Betty, "because Mrs. Smith said 'she' would come. Now why would it make any difference whether we were found there or not? They are certainly very queer people, Chris. Aren't you glad we went this afternoon? It is getting more and more mysterious."

They had almost reached home when they met Mrs. Martin. She was walking with her usual hurried step, her tall, thin figure swaying, her head bent.

"She's the crossest-looking person I ever saw," said Betty, after they had passed. "Her face was all knotted up with crossness. Oh, Chris!" She stopped in the road and looked back. "Chris!"

"What?"

"*She's* the woman."

"What woman?"

"Why, the woman who's going to the Smiths!"

"Mrs. Martin?"

"Of course."

"I shouldn't wonder!" exclaimed Christopher. "She's always going by. But what would she be going there for? Rachel Amy isn't allowed to speak to them."

"That's just the mystery. Let's go back and see if she turns down their lane. Hurry!"

"But she'll see us if we follow her, and she won't like that."

"Who cares whether she likes it or not! We have a right to walk over the road if we want to."

They argued the matter for some minutes, and in the mean time Mrs. Martin had turned the bend in the road beyond the farm and was out of sight. She had given a furtive look over her shoulder and had seen the children standing still in consultation, which had made her walk more quickly than before.

"*I* am going back to where I can see the Smiths' lane," said Betty, at last. "You needn't if you don't want to, but if you don't come I sha'n't tell you what I see. You'll never know unless you come too."

She turned and ran quickly back over the road. Christopher, impressed by this threat, followed as fast as he was able, but she far outstripped him. He was becoming very expert in the use of

his crutches, but he could not yet move as rapidly as Betty. She did not run far, however, for after she passed the bend she saw Mrs. Martin in front of her; it was only necessary now to keep her in sight. When Mrs. Martin reached the fork in the road, she turned into the lane at the left. Then she looked back and saw the children. She stopped, irresolute. Then she turned again, coming swiftly towards them. She scowled at the children as she passed.

"I sh'd think you'd better be home by this time," she said to Christopher. "I guess you don't know it's supper-time."

"We're only taking a walk," said Betty. "Is that what you are doing?"

Mrs. Martin looked at her. "I d'know as it's any of your business, little girl, *what* I'm doing," she said. Then remembering herself, she added, "Yes, I'm taking a walk."

"We'll turn and walk with you," said Betty; which they did, and accompanied her as far as the farm. She did not respond to their attempts at conversation, however, nor vouchsafe a word, and she left them without even saying good-bye.

"She's an old cat," whispered Betty. "I'm thankful we saved the Smiths from having her. I know she was going there, and I mean to keep a sharp lookout after this and stop her whenever I can."

Her aunt came around the side of the house as she finished speaking.

"Children, where have you been?" exclaimed Miss Hamilton. "It is after six o'clock and supper is waiting. I have been looking for you all over the farm."

"Didn't you get my note?" asked Betty. "I said particularly, 'do not be frightened.'"

"You might have said so forty times, Betty, but that would not prevent my being very anxious about your being gone for more than two hours. Where have you been?"

"We have been trying to find out a mystery." She told her aunt of their experiences, and when they were sitting on the porch after supper she repeated them again to Mrs. Toppan. She in turn told her husband, later in the evening, when Chris had gone to bed and the Hamiltons also were up-stairs and they were alone in the sitting-room. Mr. Toppan smoked in silence for some time. At last he removed his pipe from between his teeth.

"Marthy," said he, "there ain't the slightest doubt in my mind that something's wrong. Liza Martin ain't any kind of a walker. She never was one for tramping such a long stretch of road as it is from the village to Wilson's cottage."

This was the name by which the Smiths' house was known to the inhabitants of Maybury Centre.

It had stood empty ever since, years ago, a man named Wilson had been murdered there.

"For all she's so spry," continued Mr. Toppan, "she ain't one of the tramping kind. There's something in the wind, that's certain."

Mrs. Toppan suddenly leaned forward. Her rocking-chair ceased uttering its rhythmical creak, and the tips of the rockers were motionless in the air.

"Dan'el Toppan!" she exclaimed.

"Well?"

"Do you remember — but of course you do! How could you have forgotten him! But I do believe— Well, I want to know! Was there *ever* anything to equal it!"

"P'r'aps if you was to tell me what's exciting you to such a degree I might be able to answer. Keep cool, Marthy. There's no need for getting worked up."

"Worked up! I guess you'll be a little mite worked up when you hear what I've got in my mind. Dan'el, *do* you remember William Smith, Liza and Lucetta's brother?"

"I sh'd think I did, when he left town owing me over two hundred dollars."

"Well, it's my belief, and the more I think of it the more certain sure I am, that these Smiths may be William's family!"

"Marthy!"

"Well, why not? Stranger things than that are happening all the time. There's some reason why Liza Martin keeps travelling by here all the time. I don't believe Lucetta knows one word about it. She's got means, and she'd never allow her brother's family to be living in such poverty, even if he was such a rascal. You may depend upon it, Dan'el, they've come back here and Liza's got 'em under her thumb in some way. She's a hard woman, Liza is, and there's no knowing what she'd do."

"But why should she keep it from Lucetta?"

"Dan'el Toppan! If you ain't a man all over! Why, a blind bat would see through it. Lucetta's got money laid away, besides owning half the house. Do you suppose she'd leave that sick woman and that boy and girl to live in that little shanty if she knew they were really her own folks? No, indeed. Liza's keeping it from her. You know William married after he left Maybury, and his folks have never seen his wife or children. Lucetta was speaking of it to me only last winter, and saying it seemed all wrong. She wanted to look them up and Liza wouldn't hear of it. Well! If that's really William Smith's widow, I shall feel it my duty to go and tell Lucetta."

"Just you wait, Marthy. There's no use meddling till we know it's really so. It sounds plausible, I must admit, and accounts for that postal-card."

"What postal-card?"

"Didn't I tell you about that?" asked Mr. Topper, rather shamefacedly.

"No, Dan'el, you did not."

"Well, something or other must have put it clean out of my head. The other night I carried Lizzie's mail to her. She'd asked me to do it. There was only a paper and a postal-card, and the card was lying in such a way I couldn't have helped reading it if I was to try."

"I guess you didn't try over hard, Dan'el. I never have seen a man yet that didn't read a postal-card if it fell into his hands."

"Nor a woman, either," said Mr. Topper.

"Well, that's neither here nor there. Go on and tell me what was on it, Dan'el."

"Oh," said Mr. Topper. "I was just deciding in my mind that as long as it was so wrong in me to read it, I'd better not tell you what was on it."

"Come now, Dan'el, you wouldn't mean telling it for anything. The only wonder is you've kept it from me as long as you have."

Mr. Topper puffed steadily at his pipe. "Well," said he at last, "I don't know as I can say the words exactly as they was written, but as far as I can recall them, it was something like 'more of something.' It didn't say 'money' in so many words, but it sounded that way. Told her to bring 'more' or the person that wrote it

'would tell L.' And it was postmarked Maybury Centre. It was on the night Mrs. Hamilton's letter came, and I took your answer to the office later, and when I was coming back, who should I meet coming along our road but Liza Martin."

"It's all as clear as daylight," said Mrs. Toppan. "The only strange thing about it now is that you should have kep' it from me all this time, Dan'el. It was bound to come out sooner or later, and you might just as well have freed your mind at once. Telling L. meant Lucetta, of course, which shows she didn't know a thing about it, just as I said."

They discussed the matter for some time, and Mr. Toppan at last succeeded in persuading his wife to do nothing until she should have further proof. She insisted, however, upon going to see the Smiths at Wilson's cottage as soon as possible, and to this proposition her husband at last agreed. They also decided to say nothing to the children nor to any one else of their suspicions, until they should be fully convinced that they had made no mistake.

The next day, being Monday, was a busy one at the farm, and Mrs. Toppan had not time to visit the Smiths. In the afternoon she packed a small basket with a glass jar of milk, some eggs, and a tumbler of jelly, which Betty volunteered to carry to the sick woman. Christopher, of

course, accompanied her, but when they reached the cottage there was no one to be seen. Repeated knocking on the door brought no reply. The curtains, such as they were, were drawn at the windows, and there was no sign of life anywhere. Except for the old doll which lay by the big stone where Lucy had probably been playing, and the hoe and spade which leaned against the side of the house, it would almost have seemed that the family had moved away. After consulting together, the children placed the basket on the doorstep and then left the house, going away with many backward glances. They waited in the wood for a time, but at last they decided that they might as well go home, and they had just started when they saw Lucy Smith in the distance, her scant and faded pink dress showing through the trees as she walked along the path in the woods.

"There's Lucy!" exclaimed Chris. "She must have been to the village. That's why we didn't get in."

"Let's go back with her," suggested Betty.

"Oh no. I suppose the mother is sick and they won't want us. We'd better not."

He understood the situation in a way that Betty did not. She still wished to carry her point and go back, but for once he was firm with her. At last Lucy came within speaking distance.

"Hullo, Lucy!" cried Betty. "We've been knocking on your door and trying to get in, and nobody answered."

"Mother's in bed," said Lucy, "and George is working to-day. He got a job up to General Keith's. I had to go to the village to get some things."

"We left some things for your mother on the doorstep, that Mrs. Toppan sent," said Betty.

"She is so sorry your mother is sick," put in Chris. "She thought some things from the farm might taste good."

Lucy's face grew very grave. She did not thank them. She only said: "Good-bye. I must hurry. Mother's all alone." Then she left them.

"Wouldn't you like us to come and stay a little while?" Betty called to her.

"No!" shouted Lucy, not looking back.

"I told you not to, Betty," said Chris. "I knew they didn't want us."

"Then they're very queer people," said Betty. "When father was sick our friends were coming all the time to inquire for him, and sending him flowers and nice things to eat. We didn't mind having people come to the house."

She was still more indignant that evening when George Smith came to the farm, bringing with him the basket of eatables. He placed it on the

edge of the porch, where Mrs. Toppan and the Hamiltons and Chris were sitting.

"You needn't send us nothing," he said, gruffly. "We ain't beggars yet." Then he walked quickly away, unheeding Mrs. Toppan's remonstrances.

"I shall go there myself to-morrow," said she. "I'm only sorry I've left them alone so long. Folks said they was no good, at least Liza Martin said so. Now I come to think of it, most of those tales came from her. They can't be very grasping or they would take all they could get. There's the whistle of the eight o'clock train. I saw the Keith carriage go by, and I shouldn't wonder if the General was expected home to-night. Come, Chris, it's time for you to go to bed."

"Couldn't I just wait and see if the General comes?" pleaded the boy. "If he's home I'd like to go up there to-morrow and thank him for the flowers, and take my fiddle. You know he asked me to come."

"I'd like to go, too," said Betty.

Christopher hesitated. He seemed to be about to say something, and then decided to be silent. Betty was watching him.

"Why don't you say you'd be happy to have me go with you?" she asked, at last.

"I'd like to have you go, Betty, but I think I'd better ask General Keith whether he'd care

to have you. You see, he likes me because I play the violin, and am very fond of flowers—and for another reason."

"What is the other reason?" demanded Betty. "I *am* fond of flowers, only I don't think they're really alive like people, the way you do, and make up stories about them. And I'm very fond of music, only I don't happen to play the violin. I dare say I could if I were to try."

"Betty!" said her aunt.

"Well, I could do anything if I were to try—that is, if I tried hard enough. But what is your other reason, Chris? You've got to tell me."

But she could not persuade him to do so. It was that the General liked him because he supposed him to be the nephew of Mr. Toppan. As he was not really his nephew how could he mention this to Betty? He was beginning to regret that he had said this to General Keith. He rather wished that the old gentleman liked him because he was Christopher Lovel and for no other reason.

Mrs. Toppan had permitted him to wait for the carriage to return, and presently they heard it rumbling over the bridge. Chris hurried down to the road and stood waiting, and almost immediately the carriage came in sight and then passed. It was open and was drawn by two horses. On the back seat sat General Keith and a young man.

"Howdy do, General Keith!" cried Christopher. "I'm glad you've got back. Shall I come to-morrow?"

"Yes," was the reply, and then the carriage whirled out of sight in a cloud of dust.

"It does beat all!" said Mrs. Toppan, in a low voice. "That child makes friends with everybody. There isn't a man, woman, or child in Maybury Centre would dare to speak to General Keith at all, and there he's as friendly with him and talks to him as easy as he does to Henry, our hired man."

Miss Hamilton said nothing. She had grown unusually silent since the carriage with its two passengers had come in sight. Betty, who had also watched in silence, now turned and confronted her aunt.

"Did you see that gentleman with General Keith?" she asked. "It was the living image of Mr. Lewis, but of course it wasn't he, was it, Aunt Edith? Because he was going to Europe, wasn't he?"

"Yes," said her aunt.

Betty surveyed her. "You are *sure* he went abroad?" she asked.

"I am sure he intended to go."

"Because I should be mighty sorry to have him turn up here. It would just spoil everything to have him tagging around with us all the time."

"Hush, Betty. It is time for you to go to bed."

"I am not going to say good-night to you, Chris," said she. "You won't take me to see the General and you won't tell me the reason. To-morrow I'm going to have some fun, but I sha'n't let you come into it. You'll be sorry."

With this threat she left him and went upstairs. Christopher felt uneasy; he knew she was perfectly capable of carrying out her intentions.

That night at about eleven o'clock there was a loud knocking upon the side door of the farmhouse. No one heard it for some time, for Mr. Toppan slept heavily after his hard day's work, as did also his wife. The Hamiltons' room was on the other side of the house. Christopher, who was a light sleeper, was the first to be awakened. The noise came into his dreams, and he started up suddenly, thinking that he was back at the Home and that the noise was thunder. He listened to hear the rain fall and watched for the lightning. He was not afraid in a storm, but he was singularly excited by thunder and lightning. It was perfectly quiet, however, and instead of a storm he saw the moon shining peacefully upon the earth. Then he realized that he was at the Toppan farm—that he was not far away in the city. Presently he heard the noise again, and

then he knew that it was some one knocking on the side door, which was directly under his room. He rose quickly, and, putting on his clothes, he took his crutches and went softly down-stairs. Before he reached the door the knocking began again, and continued until he slid the bolt and opened the door. Standing outside in the moonlight was George Smith. His face was very white and frightened-looking, and his voice shook as he spoke.

"Mother's very sick," he said. "She wants to see some of your folks. She's—she's—goin' to die, I think. It's awful."

"My mother and father died," said Christopher. "They get very still and quiet. It's nicer for them afterwards, though. They don't cough any more, or have anything to make them cry or be sad."

"Hurry!" said Smith. "Tell Mrs. Toppan mother wants to speak to her. I don't know why, because she's never let us speak to anybody, but she says she must see Mrs. Toppan."

"What's the matter down there?" called Mr. Toppan from up-stairs. He had been awakened by the last knocking, and was now at a loss to know the meaning of the voices at the door.

"It's George Smith," said Christopher. "He wants Mrs. Toppan to come to his house right away."

"What does he mean by coming at this hour?" said Mr. Toppan. He spoke with unusual severity, but, awakened from the profound slumber of the early night, he felt justified in being angry. "It's time for all decent folks to be asleep in their beds. Tell him to go home at once."

Christopher left the door and went to the foot of the old-fashioned staircase.

"Uncle Dan," said he, very quietly, "George says his mother's going to die, and she wants to speak to Mrs. Toppan. Tell auntie to hurry. If she doesn't hurry it will be the way it was with my father. She'll find her very still. She won't be able to speak. She'll be beyond the blue, you know."

Mr. Toppan gave an exclamation of remorse. Then he aroused his wife, and very soon they were walking as quickly as possible towards the Smiths'. George, having delivered his message, had already gone home. Christopher went back to his room, and lay awake for a long time looking out at the moonlight and thinking about George and Lucy Smith. He wondered where their father was, and who would now take care of them.

"I suppose they'll find some friends just as I have," he thought. "If God has our fathers and mothers go up and live in the blue sky with Him, of course He sends people to look after us chil-

dren. I suppose He makes people feel like building Homes for cripples and orphans, and He made Mr. and Mrs. Toppan feel like taking care of me, so I shouldn't wonder if He meant to do just as much for the Smiths. I hope so, anyway, and I mean to ask Him."

And while he was asking Him he fell asleep.

X

MR. TOPPAN returned at breakfast-time alone. Mrs. Smith had passed away during the early morning, just as dawn was breaking upon the earth. He told Christopher that he had sent George for the doctor in the night, but that nothing could be done to save her life.

"Did she speak to auntie?" asked the boy.

"Yes, she told us both what she had to say. Chris, my boy, keep your own counsel about it. The less said, the better, in this world, especially when it's about other folks' concerns. This is sure to come out sooner or later, but just now we want to keep quiet. You understand me?"

"Yes, sir."

"That's right. That little Betty's a nice girl, nice as ever was, but don't you let her nor anyone else wheedle this out of you."

Christopher wondered why this command should be laid upon him, but he obeyed it, and did not even tell Betty about the knocking he had heard in the night, and of going down to George Smith. Mrs. Toppan came back while

the Hamiltons were at breakfast, and she told them of Mrs. Smith's death.

"Were you there?" asked Edith.

"Yes, George came for me. Those poor children! I've got a task before me I don't much like, but it's got to be done."

Then she went up-stairs and changed her dress. A little later Jerry was harnessed in the buggy, and Mr. and Mrs. Toppan drove to the village. This alone was a most unusual proceeding, and Anna and the farm-hands were filled with curiosity, as was Timothy Tarleton, who met them on the road, and Postmaster Parker, and one or two others who saw them. When they drew up at the Martins' door, where Daniel Toppan tied his horse to the hitching-post, and when he and his wife entered the white gate with the balls on the posts, and walked up the straight path which led to the front door, and rang the buzzing electric bell, the loungers on the steps of the store across the way were even more astonished.

"What's takin' the Toppans to see Liza and Lucetta at this hour?" said they. "Somethin's up, you may be sure, to bring Dan'el to the village in the middle of the mornin' when they're so busy at the farm. Why, I know for a fact he's got six men workin' there. Wonder if it's Liza or Lucetta they want to see! Somethin's up!"

In the mean time, Christopher, having watched

them drive away, decided, after some hesitation, to carry out his plan of going to Keith Hall. If he were to stay at the farm, Betty would be sure to find out in some way the events of the night. He felt that he should be unable to resist telling her, and as he had been forbidden to do so he wisely decided to run away from temptation. Then, too, the General had told him he might come. He had not been at the front of the house when his friend rode by that morning, but as it was now nearly time for him to return, Christopher stationed himself by the road to wait for him.

Betty, dressed in a stiffly starched white dress, her hair in the neatest of curls and her feet in the shiniest of shoes, sat reading on the porch. Her face was solemn, and the very way in which she followed the words with her fingers was austere. That Chris was out of favor he was well aware; and he was sorry. He did not yet know her well enough to understand that she was in what her brothers and sisters called "one of Betty's cross fits." They did not often come, but when they did they were very disagreeable to herself as well as to every one else.

She read diligently for a time. Then she moved restlessly. "I wish that laundress who washed this dress was done up in stiff brown paper and tied with a string," she exclaimed.

"What good would that do you?" asked her aunt.

"It would be such fun to know that she was getting well paid back for starching my dress this way. It's scratching me all over, and cutting my neck in two."

"You need not have put it on. There was a nice, soft gingham. And why those new shoes?"

Betty stretched out her thin, black-stockinged legs and surveyed the shoes. "I thought I'd better get used to them." Then she raised her voice so that there should be no possibility of not being heard by Christopher. "I'm going to have a very good time to-day, Aunt Edith. I'm going to make two calls; that is why I am dressed up. One is on Rachel Amy Martin. I like her better than I thought I did. I think I shall take her for an intimate friend."

She paused, hoping that her aunt would ask her where the second call was to be made, but she was disappointed. Miss Hamilton said nothing. Christopher also was silent. He stood with his back turned to the house. She thought, however, that he must have heard. Then an idea came to her. Like a flash her mood changed. She tossed aside her book and ran lightly across the green to Christopher, her face no longer long and solemn, but dimpling with laughter. She danced about him, her curls bobbing.

"You thought you wouldn't come near me while I was cross, didn't you? Well, I *was* cross, but I'm not so any longer. I've got a splendid plan. We'll do it when you come back from Keith Hall. We'll do it this afternoon. Don't tell anybody." She lowered her voice and spoke in a whisper. "We'll go out on the lake. I've got some money of my own. But, Chris, you wouldn't mind my coming to meet you this morning, would you? After you get through playing your fiddle and have talked about the flowers and are coming home. You'd like me to do that, wouldn't you?"

"Yes," said Chris, delighted that the sun was again shining; "that would be splendid."

At this minute General Keith, on horseback, came up the road from the village. "Shall I come to-day, General Keith?" cried Christopher.

The grim face relaxed slightly. "Yes, come this morning," said he.

He rode on, and even the intrepid Betty lacked courage to put the question to him that she had intended asking. She stepped back as he approached, and stared at him with wide, unblinking eyes, moving her head slowly as he passed, watching until he reached the bend. Then she drew a long breath.

"So that's your General!" she exclaimed. "He looks like a stone, and his voice is like a fog-horn.

I don't want to go there now so very much, but I'll come to meet you, Chris. I don't see how I'm going to do it, unless I either go there or tell you. Did you see that gentleman who was in the carriage with him last night?"

"Yes, a young one with a nice face."

"Well, *I* don't think his face is at all nice. I don't like him at all. I *think*—I am almost certain—that it was a friend of my aunt's. And if it is I shall be as mad as hops. I know he wants her to marry him, and I don't want her to. I am not going to give up my aunt Edith to any old Mr. Lewis."

"How are you going to help it?" asked Chris, with great interest. He had heard of lovers, but had never seen one.

"I don't know yet, but I shall manage it somehow. You find out if he is there, and then I'll plan something."

Christopher found General Keith and his visitor on the porch. He looked at the stranger with careful scrutiny. So this was a lover, he said to himself. He appeared to be very much like other men, except that he was dressed all in white flannel. Certainly there were no young men in Maybury Centre who wore white suits and blue neckties. This one was lounging in a hammock. When Chris had visited the house before, there had been no hammock on the porch.

There were newspapers strewn about, a book lying face downward upon the floor, and, most interesting of all, the young man was smoking a cigarette. He saw Christopher coming as he swung lazily to and fro, pushing himself with one foot.

"Here's your young friend, uncle," said he.

The General looked up. He had been reading his letters as usual at that time. "Take a seat," said he. "I shall be ready for you soon."

Chris seated himself on the top step and laid his crutches and his violin very quietly beside him. He felt shy at first beneath the close scrutiny of the laughing eyes of the young man. They were laughing, but Chris knew intuitively that they were not laughing at him but with him. Presently his courage gathered, and he looked around and smiled at the stranger.

"You're a nice little chap," said the young man. "What is your name? My uncle told me, but I'm afraid I've forgotten."

"Christopher Lovel. What's yours?"

"Ludovic Lewis, at your service."

"So it *is* Lewis!" exclaimed Chris.

"I think it is. But why this surprise?"

"Oh, nothing," replied the boy, recovering himself. "Is General Keith your uncle?"

"His wife was my aunt, so he is my uncle by marriage."

"So you've got 'em, too!" said Chris, with a note of envy in his voice.

"Got what?"

"Relations."

"Alas, yes! Lots of them. Who has not?"

"I haven't any."

"My dear boy, your memory plays you false. I was told that you are the nephew of Mr. Toppan."

"Oh yes," said Chris. "I forgot."

He colored painfully and turned away. Lewis looked at him curiously. He had been but a few hours in this out-of-the-way place, but already he found life there somewhat slow, and he welcomed any sort of diversion. He had not intended visiting Keith Hall, having expected to be in a very different place this summer, but something had arisen to interfere with his plans. Already he regretted having accepted the General's half-hearted invitation to stop a few days on his way to Canada, where he was going to fish. He had run across his uncle by mere chance in Boston, and a sudden feeling of pity for the lonely old man had prompted him to come home with him. Already he was bored, and glad to welcome amusement of any sort.

"You're a funny youngster," said he, in a teasing voice. "Perhaps you've got a lot of other relations tucked away that you've forgotten."

"No," said Christopher, "I haven't. Do you play anything?" He felt a dim desire to turn the conversation from the subject of relatives.

"Oh yes. I play a good many things—bridge, billiards, golf, tennis. At times I play I'm a millionaire, at other times a pauper. What is your favorite game?"

"I play backgammon and checkers, and Betty is teaching me hearts. But I didn't mean games. I meant music."

"No, I'm not a musician like my uncle and you. So Betty is teaching you hearts! That is nice of Betty. I hope she *is* a nice Betty."

"She is very nice, except this morning when she was cross. She got over it all of a sudden, though. I don't know what I had done she didn't like, nor why she got over it so quickly, but that's the way it was."

Lewis laughed. "Most Betties are like that," he said, "even when their name is—Edith."

Christopher turned his head and gazed at his new friend with his big, blue eyes. "You're him!" said he, with decision.

"I certainly am a him, or, to be more grammatical, a he, but what him or he? What do you mean, young man?"

"I can't say," said Chris. "Betty told me to find out something, and I have. She wouldn't like it if I explained."

"Miss Betty must be a very imperious and exacting young person. She reminds me very much of another Betty that I know. As we were just saying, all Betties must be alike."

They were interrupted by General Keith, who, having finished his letters, was now ready for his young visitor. He rose from his chair. "Come in with us, Ludovic," said he. "I want you to hear this boy play."

"I don't know a thing about music, uncle," began Ludovic. Then seeing his uncle's face grow a shade darker, he added, good-naturedly, "All right, sir, I'll come listen," and followed them into the house.

In the mean time, Betty Hamilton, left alone at the farm with her aunt, found the morning very long. She missed her usual playfellow and companion, and especially so as her aunt was very different from usual. Miss Hamilton was restless. She suggested walking to the village, then she declared that she was too tired to go. She established herself with her work on the front porch, and then when she heard the sound of wheels coming from the direction of Keith Hall, she hurried into the house, in what Betty called "a regular fluster," dropping her spools and scissors and thimble. The thimble rolled away, and it took Edith and Betty ten minutes to find it. That was after the wagon had passed which had

caused the commotion. It was nothing but an ancient buggy, driven by an equally ancient farmer.

"You got left that time, didn't you, Aunt Edith?" said Betty, when her aunt returned and the search for the thimble began.

"I don't know what you mean, Betty," said her aunt, with great dignity. "You are very slangy. I should think you were a boy, and not a nice little girl."

"I don't believe I'm ever what you would call a nice little girl," said Betty, down on her hands and knees while she looked for the thimble in the grass. "Never was, and never want to be. Nice little girls are always horrid, and think themselves better than anybody else, like that Rachel Amy, or a girl I know at home."

The search continued in silence for some time. Then Betty emerged rather breathless from among the bushes which grew close to the piazza.

"Here it is," she said. "Aunt Edith, I will give it back to you on one condition."

"You will give it back to me anyway," said her aunt. "I value it very highly. Come, Betty."

Betty stood at a safe distance examining it. "I know very well where it came from," she said; "you kept it a secret from everybody, but I saw you when you found the case among those choco-

lates. You opened it, and then you popped it into your pocket. Now, if you'll tell me who sent it to you, I'll give it back. If you don't, I'm sorry, but I'll really have to throw it into the lake."

Edith darted suddenly towards her, but Betty was too quick. She jumped out of the way and ran, her aunt pursuing her until, breathless and exhausted, Edith sank down upon a hay-mound at the side of the house.

"You are very naughty," she said. "I shall be obliged to write home about you."

Betty stood at a safe distance. "I'll tell you what I'll do," she said, dimpling with laughter. "Oh, Aunt Edith, I've got you! I've got you! I'm perfectly sure that Mr. Lewis sent it to you. There! You're getting redder than a beet."

"You are a very naughty girl to be so curious," exclaimed Edith. "There was no card with the candy. No name at all."

"Oh, but you knew! If you don't tell me that you think it was Mr. Lewis, I'm going to take this thimble right up to Keith Hall now, at this minute! I'm going to do it, anyway."

Betty began to dance. "Oh, I've got a splendid idea!" she cried, pirouetting about, hopping first on one foot, then on the other. "I'll tell you just what I'm going to do. Then, as I've told you, there won't be any harm in it. I'm

going to Keith Hall now, this very minute, to see if that's really Mr. Ludovic Lewis. If it is, I will give him the thimble and a message, just the way a messenger carried a ring with a message in a story I read once. The ring was to prove that the person who owned it really sent the message, you see, because the person who got the message recognized the ring. Do you understand? Well, I'll take the thimble, and I'll say: 'Mr. Lewis, my aunt sends her compliments. She also sends you this thimble, which you gave her, and begs me to ask you to leave this place at once."

Edith, nervous already, was almost in tears. She knew that the mischievous Betty was quite capable of carrying out this threat. She wished that she had never undertaken to spend a summer alone with her. She felt that it would have been far less exhausting to pass the season in visiting, as she had first planned.

"You wouldn't say what is not true, Betty," she faltered, provoked with herself because her voice shook so perceptibly.

"I would do anything to get him to go, Aunt Edith, and as long as I have warned you that I'm going to say it, it won't be like telling a real story. I'd do anything I could to stop your marrying him, and as long as he's here I don't feel safe. I'm sure you like him very, very much.

I don't want you to marry any one, and most of all, I don't want you to marry him. He's a terrible tease. I should never, never go to your house, and I certainly should never call him 'uncle.' I'm going this very minute."

"Betty!" exclaimed her aunt.

But Betty turned and ran quickly over the green. Edith sat still, anger and chagrin making her incapable of deciding what it were best to do.

"I shall write to Charlie at once," she said, aloud, "and tell him he must order Betty to come home."

Charlie was Betty's father. Then she remembered that it would be difficult to explain the nature of the trouble, and she determined to say nothing to her brother, but to plan herself a very severe punishment for her niece. Her only hope lay in the chance that it might not really be Ludovic Lewis who drove by the night before with the General. She felt, though, that she could not have been mistaken, especially as Betty also had recognized him. It was all very vexatious. She could not imagine his believing the absurd message that Betty intended giving him, but it would make known to him her presence in the village, and she had planned to avoid meeting him if possible. She could not understand her own feelings. She did not wish to see him, and yet she knew she should be bitterly disappointed

if they did not meet. In the spring he had asked her to marry him, but she had told him that she could give no answer until October. He was supposed to have gone abroad, and instead he had turned up in this little village among the hills. Did he know that she was here, and had he followed her? If so, she ought to be very, very angry with him, and yet somehow she was not. She had felt lately that October was very far away, and had wished that she had said September, or even late August.

But if he knew that she was at Maybury, why had he not already come to see her? It was nearly eleven o'clock. He might be on the way, and Betty would meet him. Edith rose quickly and hurried into the house. She was half inclined to pack their trunks and start for home with naughty Betty. Perhaps she would to-morrow. Just now she must bathe her eyes and smooth her hair. It would not do for Mrs. Toppan, when she returned, to see that she had been crying. It was all most harassing and strange, and nothing could be more annoying than the way she herself felt. Crying, forsooth! And all because Betty was in one of her mischievous moods.

XI

BETTY walked rapidly up the road. It was now late in the morning and the sun was hot. It had been quite cool earlier in the day, but the fresh breeze had died away, and although the road was shaded by trees, it was a hot and tiresome climb for Betty in her new shoes and starched frock. She had not stopped to put on her hat in her desire to elude her aunt. It was very true that Betty Hamilton had risen that morning in one of her contrary moods, and with the firm determination of accomplishing some mischief. She had been diverted from this for a time by the news of the death of Mrs. Smith, but only for a time. As she passed the lane which led to their house, she thought of Lucy. She was half inclined to go to see her, and tell her how sorry she was for her. Perhaps it would be better than going to Keith Hall with the thimble, but while she hesitated she heard the sound of a carriage coming from behind her. Looking back she saw that it was the one from Toppan farm. In it were Mr. and Mrs. Toppan and

Lucetta Smith. As they passed her she could see that Miss Lucetta was crying.

"Where are you going?" Mr. Toppan called out.

"Up the road," replied Betty, and she proceeded on her way, wondering as she did so why Miss Lucetta was crying.

She walked on until she came to the big stone gateway which formed the entrance to Keith Hall. She stood still for a moment, looking in. There was no sign of Christopher nor of any one. She walked along the avenue until she came within sight of the house. The magnificence of the place did not impress her particularly, for she was accustomed to handsome houses. The flowers, which appealed so strongly to Christopher's love of the beautiful, were also unheeded. She wished to find Mr. Ludovic Lewis, if it were really he whom she had seen with General Keith. Tired and cross from the long walk, and yet full of mischievous exultation over her aunt, her bobbing red curls twisted tighter than ever by the heat, and shining like burnished gold in the sun, she walked hatless and dusty along the avenue until she reached the steps. Still she saw no one, but from within she heard the sound of music.

She sat down for a few minutes on the steps to decide what to do, and to cool herself in the

light breeze which could be felt at the top of this hill.

"I don't think I like music," she said to herself. "I just wish Chris didn't care so much for that old fiddle. It's horrid and squeaky. If he hadn't had that fiddle he would have been home playing with me this morning instead of up here with that solemn old general. I wonder if the General will be cross with me when he sees me. I don't care if he is."

She was just making up her mind to be very bold and to enter the house, when she became conscious that some one was standing behind her. She looked around quickly and then sprang to her feet. It was Ludovic Lewis.

"Oh, my prophetic soul! 'Tis Betty!" he exclaimed. "I thought those fiery curls belonged to one of my dearest friends."

"I'm not one of your dearest friends!" said Betty. "So it is you, after all." Her voice was anything but cordial.

"Even though you had already sent a scout to find out if it is really I, you could not wait for him to return! You wanted to see me so much you were obliged to come yourself. Dear Betty! And yet you say you are not one of my dearest friends!"

He stood laughing at her. He was a very good-looking young man, especially when he

laughed, for he seemed then the personification of health and merriment and the joy of living, but all this was lost upon Betty.

"Sit down again," said he. "Those two people in there with their fiddles have forgotten themselves and everybody else. I got tired and came out to see what I could find, and lo and behold, I find Betty!" He seated himself on the step, but she remained standing. "Tell me something," he added, and his voice was very persuasive. "Where is your aunt Edith now?"

"That's telling," said Betty.

"I know it's telling. That is just what I want, that you should tell me."

"Do you think I'm going to?" A brilliant idea had come to her suddenly. Mr. Lewis evidently did not know that her aunt Edith was right here in Maybury Centre, and perhaps he need never know. Perhaps he would go away soon, and in that case her aunt would still be hers.

"Is your mother here, Betty? Who is taking care of you? I thought all the family were down at the sea-shore, as usual."

"My mother is there—and the others. A lady is taking care of me."

"Where are you staying?"

"At a place in the village."

"Now, please tell me this, Betty: Is—is your aunt Edith well?"

"Very well, thank you."

"I think you might tell me where she is. I have no intention of going to see her. Tell me, Betty, why you don't like me?"

Betty was silent. Unconsciously she began to play with the thimble, which until now she had held tightly in her closed hand. She put it on her finger and twirled it about, and as it was much too large for her it soon came off, and dropping to the ground for the second time that morning, it rolled away. Ludovic caught it and picked it up. Betty tried to snatch it from him, but he rose to his feet and held it beyond her reach.

"Where did you get this, Betty?" he asked, his face grown suddenly grave. "Did your aunt give it to you?"

"Give it to me," cried Betty. "It's mine. You've no right to keep it."

"Is it really yours?"

"No, not really, but—but—I'm keeping if for a while."

"Does your aunt know you have it?"

"Oh yes!" exclaimed Betty.

He gave it to her. "If that is really the truth, I will give it back to you with pleasure. You can tell your aunt when you see her that I was surprised to find that she had given it to you. Tell her that it gives me her answer before October, and I will not trouble her then."

Betty looked at him. "You're as mad as hops, aren't you?" she said. "You've got a terrible temper. I'll just tell you something. I don't want you for an uncle, and I'm going to do everything to stop it. I'm glad you're mad about the thimble, and I shall never tell you where Aunt Edith is."

She was silenced in the midst of her tirade by the approach of General Keith and Christopher. She stepped up to Christopher and whispered in his ear. "Be sure you don't tell anybody I've got an aunt here. Now remember!" Then she turned and ran down the steps. "I'll wait for you at the gate," she said, and presently she was out of sight.

"Who was that little girl?" asked General Keith, very much surprised by these proceedings. "Is she a friend of yours, Christopher?"

"She's staying at the farm," said the boy, who was equally amazed. "Yes, sir, she's a friend of mine. Her name is Hamilton."

"Who is with her?" asked Lewis.

Christopher hesitated. "A lady's with her," he said, at last, unconsciously making use of Betty's term for her aunt.

Before anything more could be said, Betty was with them again. She came running towards them. "I forgot to ask you something, Mr. Lewis!" she cried. "How long are you going to stay here?"

"I'll tell you that when you answer my question," said he.

"Come along then, Chris," said Betty, vehemently.

"You are an odd little girl," said General Keith. "Ludovic, do I understand that you knew her before?"

"Yes, I have known her for a long time. This is my uncle, General Keith, Miss Betty Hamilton."

Betty came slowly up the steps and put out her hand, which the General took in silence but with his most courtly manner. Then he turned to Christopher, "Tell your uncle and aunt from me that I want you to come again with your violin," said he.

"Are you ready now, Chris?" asked Betty, and the two children walked away together.

Betty for a long time was very quiet. Then she suddenly stood still in the road. "I wish that old Ludovic Lewis had stayed in New York," she exclaimed. "He has made me tell a kind of a story, just by being here."

"You didn't have to tell it," said Christopher.

"Yes, I did. Of course I don't want him to know Aunt Edith is here, so I had to sort of deceive him. But *you* can't say anything for I really believe you are deceiving the General, making him think you're the Toppans' real nephew."

Christopher did not reply at once. Then he said: "Why don't you like Mr. Lewis? I think he is nice. He'd be a very jolly person to have round all the time."

"I don't like him!" protested Betty. "He teases me terribly for one thing, and I have always noticed that Aunt Edith is very different when he is there. She pretends that she doesn't like him so very much, and she very often doesn't do what he asks her to do, like going to walk with him, or things of that sort, and she talks more to the other gentlemen who come to see her than she does to him, but for all that, I am sure that if he were to ask her to marry him, and beg her very hard, she would say she would, for I am sure he has a great influence over her, but he shall not have her! I am not going to give her up."

"Aren't you ever going to get married yourself, Betty?"

"Oh, I suppose so. I haven't thought what I shall do myself."

"Well, then, what about your aunt? It would be real mean not to let her be married and then do it yourself."

"It would be very different. I probably shouldn't have a niece who needed me. Besides, I should marry a much nicer person than Mr. Lewis."

"I think he's very nice, very nice. He helped

me with my crutches, and he gave me a splendid swing in the hammock, and his voice is so kind. It is such a laughing voice. I like it."

"There! You like him better than you do me!" cried the perverse Betty. "I think you are all perfectly hateful."

She would not speak again, although Christopher made every effort to conciliate her. When she reached the farm she dropped the thimble into her aunt's basket.

"It *is* Mr. Lewis," she said. "I told him you'd let me have the thimble, and he's mad as hops. He said something about October, but I forget exactly what. He meant no matter about it. He didn't care anything more about it. What were you going to do in October, Aunt Edith?"

"Never mind what," said her aunt. "You are a very naughty little girl, Betty. Is he—isn't he coming here?"

"Why, no! Of course not! I didn't tell him you were here. I said a lady was taking care of me."

"Betty! How could you tell such a story?"

"It wasn't a story. You are a lady. He is very mad about the thimble and everything, *and I'm glad of it!*"

"Betty!" Miss Hamilton's face was very grave. "You pretend to be very fond of me."

"Why, Aunt Edith, I don't pretend, I really am!"

"No, I can't believe that. If you cared for me the least little bit you wouldn't have acted as you have this morning. You have hurt my feelings very much."

But Betty's heart was not touched. She felt very glad that she had prevented the meeting. It now occurred to her that there was still danger that her aunt's presence at Maybury would become known in some way to Mr. Lewis. He might see her when he drove by, or they might meet on the road. If he only were to leave the place! She wished that she could discover when he intended to go, or could invent some means of bringing about his departure, and she at once set her fertile wits to work. It was certainly one of Betty Hamilton's *naughty days.*

When Mr. and Mrs. Toppan rang the front-door bell at the house of Mrs. Martin and Miss Lucetta Smith, the door was opened for them by Rachel Amy. She showed them into the best parlor. It was closely shut up to keep out every ray of sunlight, for it would not do to allow the modern furniture, covered with blue plush, to become faded. When their eyes became accustomed to the dimness, which had seemed like night after the glare of the summer morning, the Toppans could distinguish the crayon portraits on the wall. There was a large family Bible with

gilt corners and clasps on a marble-topped table between the windows. On the centre-table were some elaborately bound books of poetry, arranged in neat, criss-cross piles, and surrounding at exact intervals of space a large and ugly china lamp. In one corner of the room stood a small cabinet organ, and in another was a three-cornered étaègre, on which were arranged shells, vases, a glass inkstand, and other ornaments.

"I haven't been in this room since Liza bought this furniture," said Mrs. Toppan. "It's handsome, I suppose, but it's real stiff and uncomfortable. I guess she's got a lot of money laid away, and there's no reason why—"

"Sh!" said Mr. Toppan, warningly. "Better be careful, Marthy."

Almost immediately Mrs. Martin entered the room, followed closely by Lucetta Smith and Rachel Amy.

"Seems to me it's kind o' surprisin' to see you at this time o' day," said Mrs. Martin.

"But we're real glad to see you," put in Miss Lucetta.

"But if folks want to make calls, seems to me it's more convenient all round that they should make 'em in callin' hours," said her sister.

"If we was just making calls for a sort of pastime we would," said Mr. Toppan, in his slow, drawling voice, "but we're not doing that. We've

come on business, and if you don't mind, Liza, it strikes me it would be kind of wiser to let Rachel Amy go set somewhere else while we older folks are talking."

"I guess she can hear what I hear," said Mrs. Martin, tartly. "I guess you've got nothin' to tell us t'would do any harm for Rachel Amy to know about."

"All right, Mrs. Martin. Just as you prefer, only remember, I've given you fair warning."

"Rachel Amy, you go to the office and see if there's any letters," said Mrs. Martin, suddenly changing her mind. She felt a dull dread. What could Dan'el Toppan have come to tell them?

Rachel Amy reluctantly left the room. She felt that at thirteen she might have been included in the family councils, but she did not venture to protest against her dismissal. She knew her mother too well for that. She left the room and obediently walked to the post-office. When she returned, as the Toppan carriage was still in front of the house, she went to the kitchen. It was at the back and the parlor was at the front, and the door was closed, but even though it was, she could hear the murmur of voices; at times one rose higher than the others, and she knew that to be her mother's, and that she was very angry.

This lasted for about three-quarters of an hour. At the end of that time the parlor door was opened and Miss Lucetta came out. She went hastily up-stairs, and Rachel Amy knew she had gone to her room. There was now profound silence in the parlor, although her mother was still there with the Toppans. Very soon her aunt Lucetta came down again. Rachel Amy went towards the stairs to meet her. Her aunt was wearing a hat, and she was crying. The tears were streaming down her face.

"What is the matter?" she asked. It was so dreadful to see a grown woman crying like that. "Is anything wrong? Is somebody dead?"

"Yes, somebody is dead. Ask your mother. I can't tell you. Oh, Rachel Amy, I've been blind! Oh, I've been blind!"

Then she went to the parlor door, and Mr. and Mrs. Toppan immediately rose. They all went out of the front door without a word of farewell to Rachel Amy or to her mother, and entering the carriage drove away. Rachel Amy went to the parlor door. Her mother was standing at the window peeping out at the edge of the drawn shade.

"The men are all on the store front," she said, aloud, "and all starin' as hard as they can stare! They'll all be there when they come back. It 'll be all over town in no time. Oh, what a disgrace!

And I've tried so hard, so hard! I'm the most unfortunate person ever lived."

She turned and saw her daughter. "What are you listenin' for?" she cried, angrily.

"I'm not listenin'. What's the matter, mother? Where's auntie gone?"

"Gone to gather up a set of beggars. Goin' to bring 'em home here to live. It's a sad day for you, Rachel Amy. You're goin' to be cut out now, and won't have your aunt's money, after all, when she dies. But you're not to speak to 'em. Understand that."

"I don't know what you mean, mother. Who are coming here?"

"Those Smith children. I've never allowed you to speak to 'em, and now they're comin' to live under the same roof with you."

"But why? Why does Aunt Lucetta want them to come?"

"Because she thinks it her duty. Duty! Doesn't she owe me any duty? Here I've lived with Lucetta ever since your father died. She'd have been a lonesome old maid if it hadn't been for you and me. She forgets all that, and says she's goin' to have those children to live with her in her half of the house. Says they're her own flesh and blood, and have got to be under her roof. As if it was her roof when half the house is mine!"

"But how are they her flesh and blood, mother? Are those Smiths, those bad, dreadful Smiths, related to us?"

"They're your cousins. They're the children of your uncle William, who brought shame on us, and then died and left a wife and family. I've worked as hard as I could to save you from this awful disgrace, Rachel Amy. I've given 'em money, lots of it, and she promised she wouldn't tell Lucetta who she was. I've paid the rent of that house. Then when she found she was dyin', what did she do but send for Dan'el and Martha Toppan and tell 'em the whole story. The Toppans, of all the folks I know! So prosperous, and never havin' the least thing go wrong with 'em! She told 'em she was your uncle William's widow, and that I knew it right along and wouldn't tell Lucetta for fear she'd help 'em. Well, it was the truth. It was real bold and darin' to come right to our town. And she wouldn't leave all I could do. It's most killed me. She was always an awful set kind of person. And now she's died and left those children! If your aunt Lucetta really brings 'em home here to live, I d'know how I'll stand it. She's determined enough, Lucetta is, when she once gets waked up, to carry out anything. She's real meek appearin', but she ain't so really, as I've found to my cost more than once. But you're not to speak to 'em,

Rachel Amy, and you're not to speak to your aunt. If she really does such an outrageous thing, she's got to be made to suffer. I sha'n't move out of the house, because it's mine as much as it is hers, and I don't intend to give her that much satisfaction, but I'll do *somethin'*. I'll make her sorry for it!"

Mrs. Martin came out of the parlor and shut the door with a slam. She turned the key in the lock and then put it in her pocket. "The parlor furniture's mine, but the melodeon's hers," she muttered. "Everything else in there's mine."

XII

THAT afternoon at three o'clock, when the sun was shining its hottest, when the cattle were forced to seek the shade of the trees at the edge of the pasture and the birds were silent and hidden; when there was no sound but the call of a locust or the humming of a bee, which with the butterflies fluttering among the flowers were the only creatures that showed signs of active life — at this hot and lazy hour Betty Hamilton prepared for definite proceedings.

She had been rather quiet during dinner, and her face had worn an expression of preoccupation. She had eaten but little, despite the fact that there were fresh pease, and that the dessert was lemon sherbet. These were two dainties which Betty liked extremely, but she had merely toyed with fork and spoon in perfect silence. These signs of trouble brewing had passed unobserved by Edith, who was too much absorbed in her own thoughts to pay any attention to her niece, with whom she was still greatly displeased. After the early dinner was over she went to her room.

"I should like to be alone, Betty," said she. "I am tired and am going to try to get a nap. Suppose you stay down-stairs, but don't go in the sun. It is a very hot day."

"All right," returned Betty, with suspicious readiness, had her aunt only noticed it. "Just let me get my writing-case."

"Oh, you are going to write a letter, are you?" said Edith, with visible relief. "You might write to your mother, and to your aunt Alice, and to some of your friends. It is a good thing to do on a hot day."

Betty turned upon her a smile of comprehension. "You think you are going to keep me busy, don't you, Aunt Edith. Well, you needn't worry about that. I've got plenty to do."

She mounted the steep, old-fashioned stairs which led to the room they occupied together, and procured her writing-case. It was a very dainty and commodious affair of red leather, which had been given to her the previous Christmas. It contained every variety of note-paper and envelopes; there were pencils, pen-holder, and knife; there was a place for stamps and a package of postal-cards; there was a stick of sealing-wax and a silver seal with her monogram engraved upon it. In short, the case had in it everything that could possibly be needed by the most fastidious person, even to a pad of tele-

graph blanks. These last were, indeed, the only article that had not as yet been put to use by Betty. She had never had occasion to telegraph, much as she should enjoy doing anything so interesting. She was quite accustomed to seeing telegrams, however, for her father was in the habit of sending and receiving a great many. He always telegraphed to her mother if he were obliged to be away for a day or two, and Betty had often read his messages, and those which her mother sent in return, so she knew precisely how the blanks were filled out.

As she passed down the stairs her aunt came up, and she heard her close the door of their room and slide the bolt.

"Huh! She needn't think I want to get in!" she said to herself, indignantly. "Anyhow, I'd have a right to if I wanted, for it's my room as much as hers, but I've got something else to do now. Perhaps I shouldn't have really done this if Aunt Edith hadn't bolted that door. That just settles it. Wouldn't you be sorry, though, if you knew, Aunt Edith! You'd wish you'd left that door open."

But as Betty had decided while at the dinner-table to put this plan into action, the bolting of the door had really nothing whatever to do with it beyond serving as an additional excuse for mischief.

"I'll have to tell Chris about it for I need his help, but I'm very sorry for I know he'll make a fuss," continued Betty, in thought. "Hullo, Chris," she said, pausing at the door of the kitchen, where the boy was helping to wipe the dishes. "Come along out to our barn parlor. I've got something very interesting to do."

Chris looked up eagerly. Betty's "interesting" doings were indeed of deep interest to him. There was a novelty, an originality about her which seldom failed to charm.

"I'll come as soon as I can," said he. "As soon as we get through these plates. We're 'most through."

"Run right along now," said Mrs. Toppan, kindly. "We're ever so much later than usual to-day, and there's no reason why you should be kept in any longer. Go play with Betty, but keep as quiet as you can, it's so hot."

"We're going to be very quiet for a while," said Betty, importantly. "It's mostly writing."

"Writing?" said Chris. His face fell. "I hate writing games."

"Oh, it isn't a game!" exclaimed Betty. "It's something more exciting than that."

She led the way to the barn and to an empty box-stall which they had fitted up with all sorts of stray articles, and which they called their parlor. An old, worn-out saddle placed in the cor-

ner formed an arm-chair, a seat that had once played its part of usefulness in a now departed carry-all was the sofa, and the greatest treasures of all, in Christopher's eyes, some old reins and a broken whip, hung against the side of the stall. These had been given him by Mr. Toppan, and it was his delight to play that he was driving a four-in-hand, seated on the so-called sofa, and with the reins fastened to the wheels of one of the wagons in the barn. At times Betty condescended to sit by his side and be taken to drive, but not often. She was accustomed to real driving, and therefore the pretence had no charms for her.

"If you'd only play it was an automobile I'd go with you," she said. "We could overspeed, and be fined, and run over people, and smash into wagons and trolley-cars, and have lots of fun. We could bring out some kerosene for the smell and blow the farm horn. I love to make a noise and smash things the way they do in automobiles. If you like you could play you were the policeman to stop me for going too fast, with a book to put my number down in. That would be fun."

But on this point Chris was always firm. He preferred horses and disliked noise, and he never would play automobile. To-day, when they reached this favorite resort of theirs, he looked longingly at the whip and reins.

"I'll take you to drive, Betty," said he, tentatively.

"Drive! With all the important things I've got to do! No, sir-ee. I'm going to write a telegram."

Chris was plainly impressed. "A telegram? I never saw one. That's the kind of letter that goes over the wires, isn't it?"

"Yes, usually, but this isn't really going over wires, for I am going to send it to a person who is right here in this place."

"Why don't you just send him a plain note, then? I should think it would be ever so much easier."

"Because a note wouldn't do. You see, its this way, Chris. I've got to get Mr. Lewis out of the town, and there's no way of doing it but by sending him a telegram that will call him home."

She took a sheet of paper from her desk as she spoke, and the pencil. "I'm going to write it here first, and then copy it on the telegraph blank. I have lots of things to decide that I want your advice about."

This was a master-stroke. Chris was much pleased to hear that she desired his advice, just as she knew he would be.

"I'm going to send word to Mr. Lewis that he must go home at once. 'Come immediately—

you are needed. Hurry.' And I'm going to sign it, 'Elizabeth.' He has a sister Elizabeth, fortunately, and he'll think it's from her and rush home, while it's really me. You see, I'm telling the truth all the time and not forging, or anything like that."

Chris looked thoughtful. "But it *is* you and not his sister," he said, "and you're making him think something is the matter when it isn't. That isn't the truth."

"How do you know? Something may be the matter. Perhaps they'll be very glad to get him home. Anyhow, you can't say anything. Remember who General Keith thinks you are! My telegram is just as much the truth as the story you must have told him about Mr. and Mrs. Toppan being your uncle and aunt. There, I knew you had! Your face is getting as red as a beet. I just guessed at it the other day, but now I'm perfectly sure of it. So I think you'd better help me, for if you don't, I'll certainly go and tell General Keith you're—you're—" She paused.

"Well, why don't you say it?" burst out Christopher. "That I'm from a Home, and haven't got any relations."

"No, I wouldn't say that," said Betty, sweetly, her mood changing again. She was sorry that she had spoken so hotly to the lame boy. "I am

awfully sorry for you, Chris, because you want relations so much. But really, if you're talking about telling the exact truth, it isn't any worse for me to make up a telegram to Mr. Lewis than it is for you to pretend you're a real nephew to the Toppans. Now, is it?"

"No," said Chris, slowly. "I don't suppose it is. But ever since you talked that day about the ideals your mother told you about, I've been thinking I ought to go and tell General Keith what I really am. I think it would be more like being a real gentleman to own up to *not* being one, than to pretend I am one when I'm not. You see, the trouble is, I can't believe a real, true gentleman would ever be in a Home, and have no relations at all, so I can't think I am one, and it's awful. Of course it was wrong to let him think I'm Mr. Toppan's nephew when I'm not. That certainly wasn't living up to an ideal."

"I think ideals are a great bother," exclaimed Betty. "I wish I'd never had that conversation with mother. It is very inconvenient sometimes when I remember it. But still, I think I must carry out this plan, for it is absolutely necessary to get Mr. Lewis to go before he finds out that Aunt Edith is here, so I'm going to drop living up to ideals for a little while, and perhaps take them up again later."

Having reached this convenient decision, she

resumed her writing. "And I think you'd better help me, Chris, because you know you don't practise what you preach. I never was very fond of people who don't practise what they preach. They're something like that Pharisee man in the Bible. I'm afraid I never shall like you again unless you help me now." She was well aware of her power over him.

Chris offered no further opposition to her scheme, and presently the pen was dipped in the little inkstand which was attached to the writing-case, and the telegraph blank was filled out, signed, and folded. Betty wrote a fair hand for her age, and as her vertical strokes might easily pass for those of the ordinary telegraph operator, there was nothing in the writing to attract attention.

"Now to get it there!" said Betty. "I don't know exactly what to do about that. Of course, if we were in New York we couldn't do anything of this kind, because telegrams are always delivered by boys in uniform, but I don't suppose they have them here. Have you ever noticed any?"

Chris was obliged to confess that the only persons in uniform whom he had seen since he came to Maybury were the conductors on the trains.

"Who do you suppose delivers telegrams?" continued Betty.

"Timothy Tarleton, I guess," said he. "He does almost everything."

"Then the only thing to be done is to hire Timothy Tarleton," announced Betty, with decision. She rose and put on her hat.

"Where are you going?"

"To the village, of course, to get him."

"But he'll ask a lot of questions. He always does."

"I shall offer a reward not to. You often see it in the newspapers. 'Five dollars reward and no questions asked.' I've often wondered what that meant. Now I understand."

"But you won't give him five dollars!" cried the boy, in astonishment.

"I shall try and do it for less, but if it's necessary—" She stepped up to him and opened her purse which she had brought with her from the house. "If it's necessary I've got it here. Three one-dollar bills, and two silver half-dollars, and four quarters."

Chris was silent for a minute. "You must be a very rich person," said he, presently. Then he put on his hat and took his crutches and they proceeded to the road, quite forgetting the various injunctions which they had received in regard to keeping out of the sun.

They had not gone very far in the direction of the village when they saw coming towards

them a familiar figure. It was George Smith, who was walking slowly with his head bent and his eyes fixed on the ground.

"He's feeling bad about his mother," whispered Chris.

"Let's tell him we're sorry," suggested Betty.

"Wait!" said Chris. "Perhaps he won't want to speak to us. You'd better not."

"Oh, but I shall! Of course he'd be glad to know we're sorry for him. How do you do, George!" she added, as the boy drew nearer. He looked up with a start of surprise. "We want to tell you we're just as sorry for you as we can be, Chris and I. Chris knows what it is, because you see—well, you know how it is with him—just like you, only you've got Lucy, and he hasn't anybody except friends."

The little girl was very earnest. At first George had looked at her with a hard, surly expression, but now his face softened and he turned to Chris, but still he said nothing.

"Yes, I'm sorry too, George," said Chris. "I don't remember mother very well, but when father died—oh, it's awful! You feel like screaming and you can't. But it's nice for them. I know all about it. They don't have to worry any more about anything, and everything's fine up there." He looked up at the dazzling blue of the summer sky.

George Smith was silent for a moment. Then his lip trembled and his eyes filled with tears. He turned away to hide his face. He was nearly fifteen, and he did not wish to cry before this younger boy and girl.

"Poor George!" said Betty. Her voice was very kind and gentle. "We're very, very sorry."

Her sympathy was so unmistakably genuine that his reserve gave way.

"It's awful," he sobbed. "I can't believe she's happier away from us. I'd always have taken care of her. And if she knew we'd gone to live at Martins', she wouldn't be happy."

"Are you going to live at the Martins'?" cried Betty. "In the house with Rachel Amy and that cross—at least that—"

"Yes, she is cross," replied George. "She's a regular old witch, and what's more, she's my aunt."

"Your aunt!" exclaimed both the children together.

"Why did you never know it before?" demanded Betty, but Chris said nothing. So the Smiths, the scorned and much-criticised Smiths, who had always been regarded as little better than vagabonds, were found to be related to one of the most respected families in the village! Even *they* had relations!

"We didn't know it because that old witch

wouldn't let my mother tell who she was. My father was Mrs. Martin's brother. Mother didn't have a cent of money, and old woman Martin paid the house rent, and gave us some money to buy food as long as we wouldn't tell. When mother found she was going to die, she sent me after the Toppans and told them, and they told Aunt Lucetta Smith and old woman Martin. Aunt Lucetta's all right, and she's taken us there to live. Lucy was named for her, only we never knew it before, and she's taken a great shine to her, and I guess it's a good thing Lucy's got a place to go to, but I ain't going to stay there. I'll just tell you that. I'm going to make some money somehow. You don't catch me living in the same house with an old scold like that Mrs. Martin, who hates us like poison. She says half the house is hers, and she's going to divide it off, or something of that kind. Well, I wish she would. I'm going back to our house now to get our things. They've taken mother away. She ain't there any more. She's at Aunt Lucetta's. It seems kind of hard that now she's dead and it don't make any difference to her, she's lying in a room that's got nice furniture and curtains. Mother always wanted curtains."

He turned away again and sobbed, brushing his ragged shirt-sleeve across his eyes. Then he

straightened himself. "Well, I ain't going to blubber like a girl. I'm going to get a job and make some money just as soon as ever I can."

"I'll give you a job right straight away at this minute," said Betty, "and I'll pay you five dollars for doing it."

"Look here now," said George, roughly. "You needn't monkey like that. I really mean it, and I ain't joking. I thought you was real nice a minute ago, but I ain't going to stand any fooling, I can tell you that all right." And he walked on.

"Why, I'm not fooling a bit!" cried Betty, running after him. "Chris can tell you I'm not. We were just going to the village to get Timothy Tarleton to do it, and I didn't want to, for he always asks questions and would tell everybody. Now you wouldn't, and if you'll take this up to General Keith's place, and say it's for Mr. Ludovic Lewis, and leave it there, and never, never tell anybody who gave it to you, and never ask me anything about it, I'll give you every cent of money I've got, which is five dollars."

"I ain't a thief," said George, "though folks seem to think I am. It would be downright stealing to take five dollars for a job like that, just taking a note a couple of miles and leaving it at a door."

"No, it wouldn't. You see, it isn't only that.

It's no questions asked. People always pay more for that, I think. I should think they would, for it is such a bother to answer questions when you don't want people to know things. How much is half of five dollars?" Betty was not a great arithmetician, and never "did division," long or short, if she could avoid it.

"Two dollars and a half," said Christopher, promptly.

"Well, then, George, will you do it for that?" asked she.

"Yes," said George, slowly, "I'll do it for that, as long as you've got the money, and don't seem to mind spending." She had already opened her overflowing purse. "I'll take it and leave it, and never let on I done it. It seems a queer, shady sort of business, but that's your affair, not mine. I suppose you know what you're up to?" He paused and looked at her suspiciously.

"Oh yes!" exclaimed Betty, earnestly. "It's very important, indeed, and nothing for you to feel at all worried about."

She counted out the money and gave it to him. He dropped it into his pocket and took the folded paper.

"I guess I won't bother to do that," said he, with a gruff laugh. "I ain't going to worry over making two dollars and a half for ringing a door-bell."

He walked rapidly away, and the children stood watching him until he was out of sight.

"That was easy," said Betty, "and very satisfactory. Now, Chris, let's go home and sit on the piazza and wait for Mr. Lewis to drive by on his way to the five-o'clock train. Won't it be fun to see him go rushing by?"

Christopher did not reply, but turned and followed her as she walked slowly homeward.

An hour later one of the carriages from Keith Hall was driven rapidly past the house. The big bag on the front seat showed that some one was about to take a journey. On the back seat sat a gentleman, whose watch was in his hand, and who was leaning forward while he spoke earnestly to the coachman, as if urging him to hurry. Betty, who had been hiding behind the honeysuckle vine, stepped forward as a cloud of dust shut the carriage from their sight.

"It's a success!" she said, in a gleeful whisper to Christopher. "He's gone!"

And she danced up and down the porch, hopping first on one foot, then on the other.

XIII

"WHAT'S the matter, Miss Edith? Are you very sorry about something?"

She was sitting on a bench under one of the apple-trees in the orchard, and had not heard the crutches approaching over the grass. Now she looked up with a start and found that Chris was beside her. He stood looking at her, his blue eyes big with sympathy.

"Yes—no," she stammered. "That is—do I look as if I were?"

"Yes, you look very sorry. Is it about Betty?"

"Partly. Betty is a very naughty girl, and I am afraid she has done some mischief."

"As long as you know she has done it, can't you fix it? Can't you tell her how naughty she is? I mean, make her send another—"

He paused. He found that he could say little without betraying Betty, and yet he felt that something should be done to help his beloved Miss Edith. She was very dear to his loyal little heart. Sometimes he thought even dearer than Betty, and now she was very sad. It was tow-

ards evening of the day after the writing of the telegram, and for the last twenty-four hours life at Toppan farm had not been cheerful. Betty was obstinate and ill-tempered, Edith was depressed and silent, Chris was thoughtful and preoccupied, for his conscience troubled him, and Mr. and Mrs. Toppan were absorbed in the affairs of the Martins and Smiths. Betty was now engaged with a book, sitting in state in one of the porch chairs, and pretending that her sole object in life this summer evening was to read fairy tales. She had repulsed all of Christopher's advances towards conversation or play, but she had watched him over the top of the book when he crossed the road and made his way to the bench in the orchard where her aunt had been sitting since supper. The weather was still very hot, but now that the sun had set there was a gentle breeze.

"What do you mean, Chris?" asked Miss Hamilton. "Send another what?"

"Oh, I don't know," faltered Chris, stammering in his turn, "I guess I don't mean anything."

"If you know anything Betty has done, I think you ought to tell me. I am afraid she has made trouble between—between a very great friend of mine and me."

"Is Mr. Ludovic Lewis a very great friend of yours?" asked the boy.

"Yes," said Edith.

"Your face is a very pretty color now. It's the same color as the sky over there where the sunset is."

"Thank you, Chris. That is a very pretty compliment." She could not help laughing in spite of her embarrassment.

"If Mr. Ludovic Lewis is a very great friend of yours, I shouldn't think it would make any difference what Betty does," continued Chris. "I should think being friends would make everything all right."

"It ought to, but I am afraid it doesn't. There are different kinds of friends."

"I suppose there are. If Mr. Ludovic Lewis didn't want you to marry him, I suppose you'd be the kind of friends that would be sure everything is always all right."

"Why, Chris, how wise you are! But—but—you are taking too much for granted. I never said that—that—"

"That he wanted you to marry him? No, but Betty told me, and how she doesn't want you to, and everything. I think he's very nice, and I don't see why she doesn't like him, do you?"

"No, I don't—that—is—well, I'm glad you like him, Chris. And he's very handsome, don't you think so?"

"Yes, I think he is," replied the boy, with the

manner of one who had considered the subject carefully, as in fact he had. "He is a very laughing sort of a person, except when he was angry with Betty, and even then he was a very nice person to look at. His eyes got very dark."

"Yes, they always do," put in Edith, eagerly, "whenever he is very much in earnest. Tell me what Betty did or said, Chris, to make him angry. I want to know very much."

"If you tell!" said a loud voice, so close behind them that the two seated on the bench started in alarm. "If you do! Well, you know what will happen, Christopher Lovel!"

It was Betty. Unable to resist the temptation to join them—fairy tales were not very interesting, after all, she thought—she, too, had crossed the road and entered the orchard. As she approached she had noticed that they were in close conversation. A sudden suspicion had darted into her mind, in consequence of which she had restrained her usually swift and unquiet movements, and had crept upon them over the silent grass. Now she came around the bench and stood in front of them.

"So you're telling, are you, Christopher Lovel? That's the kind of a person you are!"

This was terrible. Chris had seldom heard himself called Christopher Lovel, and coming

from the usually careless and fun-loving Betty it had a doubly awe-inspiring sound.

"I haven't told a thing, have I, Miss Edith?" he exclaimed. "We were only talking about—well, about Mr. Ludovic Lewis's eyes."

"Huh! A great thing to talk about! The idea!"

"Well, it's the truth. Did I tell you anything, Miss Edith?"

"No, you did not," said Edith, "but if there is anything to tell I think you ought to do so. Betty is a very naughty girl, and unless things are cleared up and straightened out I shall take her right back to her father and mother. Now, Betty, I mean it. I have never known you like this before. You are usually a nice little girl, and I *thought* very fond of me, but I see now I must have been mistaken and you don't care so much for me after all. If you did you would never bring so much trouble on me."

Miss Hamilton rose as she spoke and moved towards the house. At the same moment Mrs. Toppan's voice was heard calling Chris.

"It must be bedtime" said Edith. "Come, Betty."

And Betty followed slowly, with her head bent, and digging her heels into the turf as she walked.

"Everybody is hateful," she said to herself. "I'm mad at everybody, but especially at Aunt Edith, Mr. Ludovic Lewis, and Chris."

But just then the boy stopped and looked back. He waited for her to come up while Miss Hamilton walked alone across the road.

"You needn't think I told anything" said he, earnestly. "I really didn't, though I felt like it, because Miss Edith looked so very sorry. You don't think, do you, Betty, that you could write another telegram and really send it, telling him to come back!"

"No!" she exclaimed, scornfully. "Do you think I'm going to have him come back just after I've got him to go away? Now I see that you don't like me as well as you do Aunt Edith."

"But I do, because you see, if I didn't I'd tell Miss Edith all about it."

"That's true," said Betty. "I hadn't thought of that."

And peace was restored for the time being.

In the mean time, the village of Maybury Centre was much absorbed in the affairs of Liza Martin and Lucetta Smith. It did not take long for the news to spread that "those Smiths" were so closely related to the two sisters that it was hard to believe the relationship had been so recently discovered by Lucetta. However, it was well known that Lucetta's kind heart would have welcomed them long ago had she suspected that "William's folks" were in such dire need.

"She's a good creature, Lucetta is," said Sam

Wilson on the store platform, voicing as he usually did the opinion of the village—"good as ever was, and she's scart to death of Liza, and in the little matters she'd give in ruther than have a fallin' out, but when it comes to what you might call a principle, Timothy, Lucetta'd hold her own against all the Lizas in creation. And they do say Liza's goin' to have a par-tition put up, or a screen, or somethin' or other, kind o' dividin' the house into two. It takes Liza Martin to think of a crazy notion like that. What you goin' to do about it, Tim, when the widder makes up her mind and you move your belongin's there? Half a house ain't a whole one. It would take a man with more spunk than you've got to live in half a house with Liza Martin. Wonder what kind of a par-tition it's going to be."

Timothy Tarleton himself was wondering, as indeed was everybody. The funeral of Mrs. Smith was largely attended. The poor woman who had lived and died in neglected solitude, save for her children and the Toppans, was followed to the grave by most of the inhabitants of the town. Friends and acquaintances of the two sisters came from the near-by villages, all moved by a common impulse of curiosity "to see how they took it." As the much-respected Mrs. Davis remarked to her husband, when they were driving home again: "Lucetta looks real

well in her blacks. That was a nice-lookin' little girl, too, hangin' on her arm, but the boy looked kind of hardened-like. I glanced up-stairs when we was out in the entry and saw Liza Martin and Rachel Amy peepin' over the banisters. They drew back when they saw me lookin'. I sh'd have thought she might have stifled her feelin's and had the decency to be at the funeral, but it ain't in Liza Martin to forget to be angry. They say she went out this mornin' and walked about the village dressed in a blue dress and roses in her hat. She's never worn such a hat in years. Must have had those roses laid away, and got 'em out just to spite Lucetta. I do wonder what kind of a par-tition she's goin' to put up. I'll come over again next week to see her and Lucetta, and p'r'aps it will be up by then."

The next morning the news spread quickly in the village that Liza Martin had gone to the city by the early train. Sam Wilson announced it to his intimates within fifteen minutes of the train's departure.

"Yes, sir, I saw her with my own eyes. She had on the bonnet with the red roses, and she had a bag. Not a big bag as if she was goin' for a visit, but one of them little Boston bags, as if she was goin' after bargains. She bought a ticket to the city."

"It's a long trip for bargains," said the post-

master. "More likely she's up to some mischief regardin' those children."

"It's the par-tition," replied Sam Wilson. "Mark my words, it's the par-tition. Ruther a big load for a Boston bag, ain't it?" And they all laughed at Sam's joke.

A day or two after this, Rachel Amy appeared one morning at the farm. Chris saw her coming, walking slowly and with a basket on her arm. He was alone, for the Hamiltons had hired a horse and carriage and had driven to see a point of interest which was several miles away, and they would not be back until evening. There had been some thought of taking Chris, but as it was a long drive and there would be a considerable amount of climbing to be done, when they left the carriage, to reach their destination, it was decided that it would be too much for him to attempt, and very reluctantly they had driven away without him. Peace had been practically restored during these few days, and the three were again on terms of amicable intercourse, although all was not perfectly serene.

Rachel Amy had come for eggs, and the two children went in search of Mrs. Toppan.

"Is your mother making cake to-day?" she asked, kindly.

"Yes'm," replied Rachel Amy, primly. "We're going to have company soon."

"Company! Why, child, what is your mother thinking of? You've just had a funeral in the house."

"Not in our house. We and Aunt Lucetta don't live together any more."

"You don't mean to say you've moved out? I hadn't heard it."

"Oh no, ma'am. We haven't moved out, and we're not going to; but mother says we don't live together, and what's ours is ours, and what's Aunt Lucetta's is hers, just as much as if we had two houses, and—and—the wire-netting's going up now, and the men are there fixing it, and I ain't allowed to speak to Aunt Lucetta and —and—oh, Mrs. Toppan, it's awful!" Rachel Amy threw her arms around Mrs. Toppan and sobbed bitterly. "Mother's so cross and queer, and it's all queer and dreadful, and I don't know what I'm going to do!"

For a few minutes Mrs. Toppan did not speak. She softly patted Rachel Amy's shoulder and smoothed her hair, from which her hat had fallen to the floor. Christopher's face grew very grave. He was very sorry for Rachel Amy. It seemed to him so strange and sad to have a mother who was "queer." It was really worse, he thought, than having no mother at all. After a time the girl became calmer.

"You see, the house is being divided off," she

explained. "You know the stairs go right up the middle of the house. Well, the wire-netting is being put right in the middle of the stairs and the middle of the entry, all the way up. Mother thought first she'd divide it the other way, back and front, but she said it would never get settled who'd have the front of the house and who'd have the back. She said she'd be willing to have the back on account of having the kitchen, only it would look as if she'd given in too much to Aunt Lucetta, and been made to live in the back if she did that. Besides, she'd never know what was going on out front if she did."

"And who has the kitchen side now?" asked Mrs. Toppan.

"Aunt Lucetta, 'cause mother wanted the best parlor and the room over it that's got grandmother's furniture."

"But what does your mother do for a kitchen?"

"She's got the sitting-room, and she bought a cooking-stove in the city, and the men who are putting up the wire-netting fixed it. She went to the city instead of getting things over to South Maybury, because she didn't want folks should know anything till it was all done. She's taken half the kitchen things, and when there was an odd plate or an odd pan or anything, mother broke 'em in two."

"Why, your mother's crazy, child!" cried Mrs. Toppan. "She must be!"

"Yes'm, I think she is. When Aunt Lucetta saw her doing that she said mother might have the extry pieces, because they'd be no good to any one all broken."

"Well, I want to know! It does beat everything I ever heard tell of. Here are your eggs, Rachel Amy, and you just come to me if you need help or anything. I'd be glad to do what I could."

"I wish Chris could walk part way back with me," said Rachel Amy, wistfully. She was sorry to leave this friendly atmosphere. "It's just hateful at our house now, and it's awful queer having those Smiths living with my aunt Lucetta, and that Lucy Smith calling her aunt and everything, and me hearing her and not allowed to speak to my own aunt." She began again to cry, but she quickly stifled her emotion. She had already learned repression and self-control.

"Of course he can go," said Mrs. Toppan. "I was thinking of sending him to do an errand over there at your aunt Lucetta's, anyway."

"He won't be allowed to come into our part of the house," said Rachel Amy. "Mother said she wouldn't have anybody coming that was friends with Aunt Lucetta and the Smiths."

"Well, he can go see them and take Lucetta a

cream cheese; I'd planned to send him with it, and I guess I won't give it up on account of your mother's tantrums, Rachel Amy, though I am very sorry for you, poor child!"

The two walked to the village together, Rachel Amy carrying the eggs and Christopher with a basket, containing two dainty cream cheeses, slung by a cord about his neck.

"Has that red-headed girl gone away?" asked Rachel Amy, suddenly, after a silence which had lasted several minutes.

"Oh no. She and her aunt have gone on a long drive. I don't call her hair so awful red, Rachel Amy."

"Well, I do. Red as fire. I don't suppose she's got any queer folks belonging to *her*. She'd never have to live in half a house with a wire-netting, would she?"

"No, I suppose not."

"Well, don't you tell any one what I've said. I'm going to pretend to most of the folks that I don't mind a bit. Here we are. I go in the front door, but you've got to go round to the back. Those Smiths will be there sitting on our porch and in our kitchen, owning everything. Mother says it would all have been mine some day if they hadn't come. I don't mind about that so much, but I do mind about their having my aunt Lucetta. It's awful!"

Then, afraid that her emotion would again get the better of her, she ran up the steps and entered the front door, which until recently had been so little used, while Christopher made his way to the back of the house.

XIV

HE found Miss Lucetta sitting on the back porch. She was shelling pease, and little Lucy Smith was helping her. They both wore black dresses, but Miss Lucetta's was partly covered by a blue gingham apron, while Lucy was protected by a pinafore. Lucy was very quiet, and at first she scarcely spoke to Christopher. The sudden changes that had come into her life, extreme and painful as they were, had had the effect of making her very silent. The care of her mother had caused her to seem older than her years in many ways, but she was also very childlike. She could not understand the strange condition of affairs which existed at present. Her mother was gone, and the two persons in the village who had always been most unkind and disagreeable to her, Mrs. Martin and her daughter, were now her nearest relatives, but they were still unkind. She liked her aunt Lucetta, but as yet she scarcely knew her.

Lucetta also was silent and self-contained. The state of hostility in which she and Liza now

lived had acted like a blight upon the peace-loving little spinster. She, who had passed her life in subjection to her sister's domineering will, now found herself in the strange and unexpected position of open defiance of that sister, and while, with the steady determination and fortitude of her ancestors, she continued in the path which she considered to be that of duty, it was plainly evident that Miss Lucetta suffered. She tried to be kind to the children whom she had taken under her charge, and she succeeded, for it would have been impossible for Lucetta Smith to be anything but kind, but in secret she pined for Rachel Amy, whom she had loved and cherished since the child was born, and she pined, too, for the sister whose home she had always shared, termagant though Liza was, and in "making things easy" for whom Lucetta had spent her life.

She looked up, however, with a pleasant smile of welcome when Christopher's crutches thumped on the flag-stones which paved the path around the side of the house.

"I'm glad to see you, and Lucy is too," she said. "The child's lonesome enough to-day, for George has gone to some new work over in South Maybury."

"He's got a place at last," said Lucy. "It's his good clothes, he says." Then she relapsed

into silence and never looked up from the pease she was shelling.

From the house came the sound of hammering. Chris thought it must be the men putting up the wire-netting of which he had heard so much. He should like to see it, he said to himself, and wondered if he dared ask to go in. He concluded that it would not be polite, and he refrained therefore, but his good manners were presently rewarded.

"I declare, it does me good to see you," said Miss Lucetta. "You look like a bit of sunshine, your face is so bright. We've been very sad here lately. It was nice of Mrs. Toppan to send me those cream cheeses, and you tell her so from me. Marthy Toppan always was a good friend of ours."

She lowered her voice and looked about apprehensively. In spite of the partition of the house, and the division of dishes, she still expected to see Liza appear in the doorway, and to hear her angry voice reprove her for praise of Martha Toppan. "Lucy, you take Chris into the kitchen and give him some of those doughnuts we made yesterday. Give him some to eat now on a plate at the kitchen-table, and put some more, as many as a dozen, into his basket."

The two children went into the house. A door which led from the kitchen to a passageway

stood ajar, and at this moment another door, leading from the passage to the other side of the house, was suddenly thrown open, thus causing the sound of hammering to be still more plainly heard than it had been from the back porch. Chris, unable to restrain his interest, peered out into the little hall. As he did so a man passed by the open door at the other end. He was a rough-looking man in workman's clothes, and he carried some tools and a roll of wire-netting. He did not see the little lame boy who stood leaning on his crutches while he gazed eagerly forward. Chris uttered a half-suppressed exclamation. Then he turned, and without a word he hurried from the kitchen and from the house.

Lucy and her aunt looked after him in astonishment, and both called to him that he had forgotten his doughnuts and his hat. He paid no heed to them, but continued on his way, his crutches fairly flying as he hastened over the road. He did not go towards home, for that would have taken him past the front of the house, and he felt that he might then be seen. He took a narrow path which led from the back door to a side road, and then he followed that road he knew not whither. His one desire was not to be seen again. That, and a great overwhelming terror, were all of which he was conscious.

The morning wore away. Mrs. Toppan, busy with her household cares, gave little thought to Christopher's prolonged absence, unless it were one of satisfaction that he was spending so much time with Lucetta and Lucy.

"He'll do them a sight of good," she said to herself. "He's a bit of sunshine dropped right out of the sky, if ever there was one. It does beat everything the way that boy's twined himself round my heart, and I believe it's the same way with Dan'el, only he don't say much about it. I'm glad he's staying to cheer them up. They need it badly enough."

So when the dinner-hour arrived and still Christopher had not come, his absence was commented upon as something unusual, but easily accounted for.

"Of course they've kep' him to dinner," said she. "You may depend upon it, Lucetta's glad enough to have him there. He's playing with Lucy, probably, just as he does with Betty here at the farm."

"Well, as long as you take it so, Marthy, I suppose there's no use in my worrying," said Mr. Toppan. "At the same time, as the boy ain't in the habit of going anywhere for so long, least of all of staying out to dinner, it strikes me as being rather strange. You don't suppose he's fallen down and hurt himself, do you? I always

feel as though that might happen any day, scampering round so fast on those crutches the way he does."

"Oh no, not a bit of it, Dan'el. Depend upon it, they've kep' him to dinner, and he knew it would be all right to stay as long as I know where he is."

But in spite of these reassuring words, Mr. Toppan still felt anxious, and at four o'clock he came in from one of the distant fields where he had been at work that day. He found his wife, dressed for the afternoon, sitting with her knitting on the front porch. She faced the road from the village, and her eyes were fastened on the farthest point visible rather than upon the half-made stocking in her hand.

"Hasn't he come home yet?" demanded Mr. Toppan.

"No, he hasn't. I guess he'll be along directly now. It's four o'clock."

"Well, it's time he was here. I'm going to harness up and go after him."

"Dan'el! You don't think anything's really happened, do you?"

"I don't think anything. All I know is he ought to be here by this time, and he'd better be looked up."

And without another word he made his way to the barn, and presently Mrs. Toppan heard

the slow and heavy tread of old Jerry, as he was led from his stall to the drinking-trough.

"Dan'el's just about as worried as he can be, and I don't know as I wonder at it," she said to herself. "I don't believe I can stand it waiting here at home. I'll go along with him."

She hurried into the house for her hat, and then to the barn, where she seated herself in the buggy before the horse was harnessed into it. Very soon they were off. Neither spoke a word until they drew up in front of the house to which Christopher had accompanied Rachel Amy Martin that morning.

Mrs. Martin, from her point of vantage in her front room, saw them stop. Her indignation was great when she thought they had come to see her, but it was still greater when she found that they went around to the back of the house to find Lucetta. She was about to go down-stairs, that her sharp ears might pick up any bits of conversation that should find their way through the netting, when she was arrested by the strange and unwonted sight of the Toppans running down the path. Yes, actually running! They climbed into the buggy and old Jerry received a cut of the whip such as he had never before experienced during his long life at Toppan farm. They drove off, turned into the narrow road at the right, and disappeared from view.

"Well, if that don't beat all!" thought Mrs. Martin. "What ever can have happened?" And for the first time she regretted that she was no longer on speaking terms with Lucetta. She called Rachel Amy, but the little girl could tell her nothing beyond the fact that Christopher had walked back with her that morning, carrying cream cheeses to her aunt.

The hammering had ceased now, the partition was finished and in place, and the two men who had put it up would soon make ready to take the evening train for the city.

The road by which Christopher had fled from sight that morning forked soon after it left the village, and became little more than two lanes, one, however, being much more frequented than the other. The branch which he followed was one which was used chiefly by wood-cutters in winter. In summer, grass and weeds grew luxuriantly above the deep ruts, sumach bushes bordered it closely, and asters and golden-rod, now in bloom, showed blue and yellow against the green. After a few level yards the lane descended abruptly into a hollow where there was a tiny stream crossed by a rough plank bridge. It was muddy on either side of the brook, and a difficult matter here to move one's crutches. They seemed always on the point of sticking

fast or sinking in very far, and they came out with a gurgling, oozy sound, only to plunge deeper at the next step. It is most annoying when one is in a hurry to be detained by crutches.

Christopher, however, never faltered in his flight. After leaving the brook there was a hill to be climbed, a rather steep and stony hill, which seemed even harder work than going through the mud, but that, too, was at last surmounted, and now the way was level and dry. It was very rough, though, and so uneven that there was great danger that the crutches would slip. The boy looked back over his shoulder once or twice. Then he stopped and listened. He heard but the silence of the woods.

"He isn't coming!" he said, in a whisper. "He'd have caught up to me by this time, running on two legs. Perhaps, after all, he didn't see me!"

It seemed too good to be true, for he had always been so sure that Peter Snell would recognize him at once should they ever meet again. It was a terror that he had kept hidden in the depths of his childish heart, but it was a very real terror, as those of children are. Would they but tell their fears to some kindly, older person so much suffering might be saved.

For the man whom Christopher had seen was he with whom he had lived for the short time that had elapsed between the death of his father

and his accident. The man whom he remembered with fear and horror, to escape from whom even the suffering of great pain seemed but a small price to pay, and never to see whom again he would go on crutches cheerfully all his life. And here was that man in Maybury Centre. The boy could not yet reason about it. He did not remember that the workmen would go back to the city when their task was finished. Perhaps he had not understood in the first place that Mrs. Martin had gone to the city for her wire-netting, and the men to put it in place. All that he now knew was that Peter Snell was in Maybury Centre. Had he spoken to Mrs. Toppan of his fears about seeing him again, and his dread lest he should be forced to return to him, she would have comforted and reassured him. She would no doubt have told him that she hoped to keep him always at the farm, for that was what, with her husband's consent, she planned to do, but Christopher had heard no word nor hint of this, and the possibility of anything so wonderful had never crossed his mind. He supposed that he was to go back to the Home when summer was over. Further than that his thoughts did not go. He should have his violin, and Jess and the others would be there, and perhaps some day, when he was a big boy, they would let him come for another visit at Toppan farm.

But he did not linger now to think these thoughts. He must get away — away — farther and deeper into the woods!

The cart road was now little more than a path. There were the marks of a horse's hoofs rather freshly made, but the boy did not see them. He had been brought up in the city, and many such things escaped his notice. On he went through a cleared space, and then into a thicker mass of trees. He was now in the heart of the woods, and he felt that he could rest. The trees were tall pines, so very tall that he could scarcely see their tops waving against the blue sky. The ground was covered with a carpet of pine-needles, and there was a great patch of soft moss, with a rock to lean one's weary back against. He sank upon the kindly moss with a sigh of content, and laid his crutches beside him.

"This is grand!" he said, aloud, and then paused, frightened by the sound of his own voice. A red squirrel was frightened too, but it soon came back to look with curious eyes upon this new-comer. Some birds drew near to investigate him after their first flutter of fear, and when they found that he intended no harm they stayed and hopped about quite near him, and presently two gray squirrels with shrill chatter ran from tree to tree, their long, fluffy tails waving. There was a great deal to watch, and it was very peace-

ful, and after a little while the tired boy stretched himself out and fell asleep upon the bank of moss.

When he awoke, although he did not know it, it was several hours later. His sleep had been heavy and long, for he was very weary. He woke up suddenly, wondering where he was. It must be a forest and not the Home, or the room where he had lived with Peter Snell, which he had been dreaming about. The forest where fairies lived, of course, of which he had read in Betty's book. Then he remembered. He was in the Maybury woods, and he had run away from Peter Snell, who was really and truly in Mrs. Martin's house in Maybury. In the house with Rachel Amy and Lucy and all of them. He would tell them that he knew Christopher, and that he was going to take him back to live with him in the city just as soon as he could be found. If he were only safe at the farm! How could he get there? It must be dinner-time, for he felt so very hungry. And then he heard the sound of a horse's hoofs.

He dragged himself hastily behind the rock that he might not be seen. Was it Peter Snell coming at last? He peered out, scarcely daring to breathe. The sound came nearer. Some branches crackled as the horse brushed past them. Then the rider came into sight.

"Oh!" exclaimed the boy, in a loud voice. "It's you, General Keith! Oh, I'm so glad!

Glad! Glad! I thought it was Peter Snell!" And he began to laugh and then to sob and cry.

For once the old soldier was startled out of his usual calm. During his lonely ride through the woods by his favorite bridle-path, his thoughts had been busy and had been sad as well. He had allowed them to dwell, though almost against his will, upon the son and daughter who had been so very dear to him, but whom he had treated with such harshness. He well knew that he had been in the wrong. They were all gone now, gone where he could not reach them, his son, his daughter Emily, and Emily's husband and her child. At the time of her death they had sent him word, but he had taken no notice of it, and later he had learned that her husband and her child had followed her. He was thinking of this when the clear, childish tones had sounded in his ears, and for a moment, aroused from his heavy abstraction, he had thought it to be Emily's child calling to him from the depths of the usually deserted woods, and he actually trembled, soldier though he was. Then reason reasserted itself, and he looked to see who was near. He was astonished to find that it was his little friend of the violin, Christopher his name was, was it not? Daniel Toppan's nephew.

"Oh, I'm so glad it's you and not Peter Snell!" cried the boy. "You won't let him get me, will

you, General Keith? You won't let him take me back to the city, will you? Even if he should come along now you'd say he couldn't, wouldn't you?"

His faith in his friend's power was absolute.

"Who is Peter Snell?" asked the General. "And why are you so far from home? And why are you so afraid he will take you away?"

"He's the man I lived with after father died, and before I was hurt. He's a bad, cruel man, and he's here in Maybury putting up Mrs. Martin's wire-netting. He'd take me back, sure as anything, if he caught me."

General Keith had dismounted and stood holding his horse by the bridle. Christopher, too, was standing, leaning on his crutches. They faced each other, the tall old man and the little lame boy. Through an opening in the trees a ray of the afternoon sun struck full upon the boy's bright hair. He looked up fearlessly into his friend's face.

"But why are you afraid of a man named Peter Snell? Is he related to you?"

"Oh no, sir!" Chris shuddered at the thought.

"Well, then, your uncle will protect you, Daniel Toppan."

"Mr. Toppan isn't my uncle."

"But you certainly told me he was!"

"I know I did, but I told you a story. I was

a bad boy to do it. I was coming some day to tell you about it. I've been putting it off, but I knew I was bad. You see, it was this way. I did want there to be one person in the world who'd think I had some relations, just for a little while. I haven't got any. I was coming soon to tell you. I came from a Home, but before I was hurt I lived with Peter Snell, and he *could* take me back to the city with him if he caught me and wanted me to go."

And having said this he turned his head away and looked at the ground.

XV

"DON'T you know that it is very wrong not to speak the truth?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then why did you do it? Merely that I might think that you had relatives? Am I the only person to whom you have told this absurd story? I can scarcely believe it."

"Yes, you are, General Keith," faltered Christopher. "You see, everybody else knew. Everybody in the village stared at me because I came from the Home and walk on crutches and have no relations. And when you asked me that time if Mr. Toppan was my uncle, I said he was, just as quick as anything, because it was so splendid that there was one person who didn't know. I guess you'd feel that way, too, if you were a little boy like me. I suppose you can't understand, because you're a big man and have people somewhere, I guess, who are kind to you, and you can be kind to them. It must be very nice to have sons and daughters and nieces and nephews and brothers to be kind to. I suppose you had a

father and mother, and did you have sisters and brothers when you were a little boy like me?"

"Yes."

"And after you were grown up you had some more people to live with, didn't you? Children. I suppose you have had relations all your life. Most people do—except me. I'm sorry I told you what wasn't true, but it was very nice for a little while to have you think I was Mr. Toppan's nephew. I hope you'll excuse me."

The man was silent. He was not thinking of the boy's lie. His thoughts were again very far away, and they had been sent there by the childish words.

"Are you very angry with me, sir?" asked Chris, speaking timidly.

"No, I am not angry," said General Keith, in a softened voice. "I am not angry. But now you must get home. Do you suppose you could ride in front of me?"

"*On your horse?*"

"Yes. What's the matter? Are you afraid?"

"Afraid? No, indeed! Afraid of a horse! But it makes me feel as if this were a fairy wood, after all. You see, I thought I could never get back to the farm, and while I was thinking it you came riding along, just like the prince in Betty's book, and if you had given me three wishes, the way they always do, the first thing

I should have wished would have been to get up on your horse. It is too wonderful! I think you are a *very* kind person."

"Humph! Well, I am not generally considered so. Come now, let us see if we can get you up."

It was accomplished more easily than one would have thought possible. The crutches were handed up after him, and then the General himself mounted.

"Do you think, sir," said Christopher, and his voice had again grown timid, "that we could get back to the farm without going through the village, so as not to see Peter Snell? He'd be sure to see me, riding along so grand on horseback, and—and—it would be dreadful to have him come and take me off!"

"We need not go through the village, but you need not be afraid of any Peter Snell. You can tell me about him now, everything you know, and all that you remember about your father and mother."

He turned his horse's head the other way, and they rode off through the forest. And as they rode, and he listened to the story so freely and so fearlessly told, and he felt the slight, boyish form within the arm which he placed about him, and the bright, golden head now leaned for a moment against his breast, now turned until he could see the sunny face, the old man thrilled

with an emotion to which he had long been a stranger. It was akin to that which he had felt when the thought of his children came to him against his will, but it was more real, more tangible. For there was a living, breathing child within his arms.

Mr. and Mrs. Toppan had meanwhile been driving anxiously about the country. When they had reached the fork in the road, they had chosen the wider division, the one which Christopher had avoided. This took them in quite a different direction, and led by a roundabout way back to the main road, beyond the town. They returned to the village, therefore, and after stopping again at Lucetta Smith's to ask if Christopher by any chance had come back, they continued on their way to the farm. They overtook and passed two men who were walking towards the station, and who carried shabby-looking bags, which evidently contained workmen's tools. At this hour the store platform was deserted, its usual occupants having gathered at the station. Daniel Toppan glanced back, and then drew in his horse and waited for the strangers to come up.

"Have you seen a little lame boy on crutches?" he called out.

"'Ain't seen a lame boy or anything else, lame or otherwise," replied one of them. "'Ain't never

been in such a lonesome place. The only folks we've seen have had a screen put up to keep 'em apart. Kind of like a lunatic asylum here, ain't it?"

The other grunted at his friend's wit, but said nothing audible. Mr. Toppan drove on.

"What an awful-looking man, Dan'el!" said his wife. "His eyes were as shifty! My! I wouldn't like to have him round Maybury much. What was Liza Martin thinking of? I'm glad they don't like it here."

They had asked news of Christopher of the very man from whom he had fled.

Daniel Toppan said nothing. His one thought was to find the boy and to find him unhurt, and his mind was busy with ways and means to continue the search. He decided to go home and see first if the boy had come. If not, he would call the hired men from their work and send them out to scour the country, while he would return to the village and get more men there to help. If any harm were to come to that child!

"Marthy," said he, at last, "perhaps the Lord has allowed this to happen to show us how fond we are of that boy. I knew I was powerful fond of him, but I didn't suppose it had reached any such proportions as this. I guess I couldn't bear it if anything has happened to him. If it hasn't, and we get him back safe and sound, I propose

to make him our own as much as the law will let us."

"You mean adopt him, Dan'el?" She could scarcely say it. It was what she had longed for, but she knew her husband's views on this subject.

"That's just what I do mean. You know I ain't one for that sort of thing. I've always held that it warn't a safe thing to do. Like father like son is a good proverb, and if you don't know the fathers you ain't safe about the children, but I guess we're all right with Chris. If ever there was a little son of sunshine, he's the boy that is."

Mrs. Toppan grasped her husband's arm, and held it tightly with both hands. When she could find her voice she spoke.

"Thank you, Dan'el!" It was all she could say.

They drove in silence until they had crossed the bridge and turned the bend in the road which brought them within sight of the farm. Coming down the road from the other direction were Miss Hamilton and Betty, returning from their long drive. At the front steps stood General Keith's horse. He had dismounted, and was lifting Christopher from the saddle. He stood for a moment with the boy in his arms. Then he placed him gently on the ground and gave

him his crutches. The Toppans could see that Chris was speaking to him eagerly.

"Look!" said Mrs. Toppan, again pressing her husband's arm. As she spoke, a dull premonition entered her mind, a strange suggestion. What if the General should also want the boy? What if he should have a right to him? He might be—there was no knowing—he might be Emily Keith's child!

General Keith was in the saddle again before the Toppans reached their door, but he waited. He touched his hat with his riding-crop as they approached. "Toppan," said he, "I found this child away over in the Dickinson woods. He's had a bad fright which he will tell you about. I should like to have a talk with you. Can you call at my house this evening?"

"Well," drawled Mr. Toppan, "it's likely I can, and then again it's just as likely I can't. I should say on the whole the probabilities are I can't do it this evening."

They were still seated in the buggy, and Mrs. Toppan gave her husband a violent nudge in the arm. "Go!" she murmured.

"Not to-night," he continued, unmoved.

"To-morrow, then," said General Keith, with some impatience. Long as he had lived among these Northern farmers, he still resented their independent ways. "Any time to-morrow."

"Well, it won't be in the forenoon. The forenoon's a busy time here. Nor in the afternoon. They're about as busy. If it's any time, it 'll be shortly after sunset. I guess I can step up then for a few minutes."

"Very well," said General Keith, touching his horse lightly with his crop.

"We're obliged to you for bringing our boy back, General," called out Mr. Toppan. "We've been looking for him ourselves. We were getting a little mite anxious, wife and I, over that little boy of ours."

General Keith glanced at him sharply. Mrs. Toppan, who had been about to express her gratitude also, was rendered speechless. Daniel had never called him "our boy" before, and now he twice used the term. Nothing more was said, and the General rode away.

"Why wouldn't you go to-night, Dan'el?" whispered his wife.

"Take it easy, Marthy, take it easy. A farmer's wife ought to know there's nothing gained by overhaste. You don't get your cream until the pans have set a while. I need time to think things over and get my field planted before I begin to hoe the potatoes. Well, little one, you give an account of yourself!" He got out of the buggy, and, putting his arm around Christopher, he turned up the childish face and looked

keenly into it. "What frightened you, my boy?"

"The man at Mrs. Martin's," whispered Chris. "Here's Betty and Miss Edith. Can I wait and tell you afterwards?"

By this time Mrs. Toppan had left the buggy and had her arms around him.

"What's the matter?" called Betty, as she and her aunt drove up to the door. "What are you all hugging Chris for? And where has he been riding on horseback in front of General Keith? Well, I hope you were happy, Chris. You've been crazy to get on that horse for so long."

"I was happy!" said the boy, with shining eyes. "It was the best fun I ever had in my whole life. It is the queerest thing, Betty, to feel a horse moving along and you're on him. His neck is just like satin. I felt some satin once. A lady who visited the Home had it on her dress. His neck kind of stretched way out, and his head bobbed when he was walking. He walked nearly all the way home. Once he trotted, but it joggled me so that the General made him walk again. My, but it was grand!"

"Ho!" said Betty, scornfully. "I've often been on horseback. I go to riding-school in winter, and jump and do lots of things. My pony won a blue ribbon at the Horse Show. We've

had fun to-day, haven't we, Aunt Edith? Better than being with any of your old generals."

Chris thought it an odd thing that Betty always seemed to make light of the pursuits which he found attractive, but in which she had taken no part, and did not appear to like the persons whom he called his friends. General Keith and Rachel Amy were two conspicuous examples of this. She seldom lost an opportunity to speak slightingly of either. There was one thing, however, which he wished her to know as soon as possible, so in spite of her indifference to the joys of horseback-riding and the society of the General, he invited her to go with him to get a drink of water. Betty accepted this proposition, and they repaired to the pump, which was out of ear-shot of the house.

"Betty," said he, "I've told General Keith. I've told him I'm not nephew to the Toppans, and I haven't got any relations and I'm from a Home, and oh, Betty! It doesn't make any difference! He said I was naughty to tell the lie, but I think—indeed, I'm quite sure, the General likes me just as much."

"Well, I always supposed he would," replied Betty, rather unfeelingly. "You're the funniest boy! I don't see why people are going to like you any better for having a father and mother and sisters and cousins and brothers and uncles

and aunts. But I think you got off very easy about the story you told."

Both children were silent for a moment. Betty dug her heel into the soft ground about the pump and twirled around on it.

"I think I did, and I feel better for owning up to it. It's a great deal easier and nicer after you've once told, Betty. You feel so light and as if you could fly. Why don't you tell your aunt about the telegram and get through with it?"

"Hush!" cried Betty, in the loud voice she sometimes assumed. "Hush! Hush! Hush!"

Then she ran into the house and left him wondering at the pump. He thoughtfully emptied the dipper, replaced it on the hook, and limped slowly back to the porch.

"Come here, my dearie!" exclaimed Mrs. Toppan, who was waiting for him. "Never get so frightened again, child! Don't you know your Uncle Dan'el and I will take care of you, and not let any harm come to you?"

That night he told them the story of Peter Snell. Later he fell asleep with his hand in that of Mrs. Toppan, quite certain that he need never again fear the man who had filled his heart with terror ever since his father's death, although as yet he did not know that they intended to make him legally their son.

Tired with their long drive, Edith Hamilton

and Betty went early to their room. They were both soon asleep and therefore they neither heard nor saw the carriage which was driven rapidly past the farm shortly after the arrival of the late train. It was one of General Keith's carriages, and had been sent to the station in response to a telegram which he had received that day, telling him that his nephew, Ludovic Lewis, would return and spend a day or two if convenient, and would arrive that night.

"Humph!" muttered the General. "He doesn't wait to hear whether it is convenient or not. Just like that young fellow. He takes a great deal for granted."

But in spite of these seemingly inhospitable thoughts, he was really rather glad that the young man was coming back to the great, empty house—empty save for the servants and the fine old furniture and the works of art. It seemed especially barren when the General entered it after his ride with Christopher. He looked about him, however, with softened eyes.

"It will not be so long," he said, half aloud. "It will not be empty long, nor so still. We shall have music, and the boy shall have a horse of his own. I will atone to him for my neglect of my Emily and her child. Blind, blind that I was!"

When the carriage containing Ludovic Lewis passed the farm that night on its way from the

station, he looked long and eagerly at the house. There was nothing to be seen but the light from the sitting-room windows. Mr. and Mrs. Toppan were still down-stairs, for they had much to discuss. The windows up-stairs were dark, and there was no sign of life.

"I only hope they haven't gone," thought he. "James," he said to the coachman, "do you know whether those boarders are still at Toppan farm who were there last week?"

"Yes, sir, I seen 'em this afternoon, the young lady and the little girl, driving theirselves over this very road, sir. It was just about here, sir, I seen 'em. They 'ain't had time to get away, sir, since then, I shouldn't suppose."

Ludovic silently wished that he had been where James was that afternoon. "If I could have met them!" he thought, savagely. "When I once get hold of Betty! For I feel an absolute conviction that that imp of mischief is at the bottom of the whole affair, though how she managed it is a mystery. She is equal to almost anything, though." Then, more softly, "And if I could have met Edith!"

But Betty slept on, blissfully unconscious of the just retribution that was about to descend upon her. Indeed, she had given very little thought to the trick which she had accomplished, unless it was one of supreme satisfaction with its

success. Once in a while, perhaps, her conscience troubled her, but she put the matter aside and thought about other things. She did not like to be reminded that she had done something which she knew would be considered dishonorable, and she had therefore been very angry with Christopher when he made his suggestion of confession at the pump that afternoon. It was at such times that she felt uncomfortable. In fact, there was always a feeling in her inmost heart that there was something wrong and untrue, and in consequence of this she was often cross and unlike herself, but she would not acknowledge that the feeling was there. When she did think of it she told herself that she was not sorry that she had forged the telegram. On the contrary, she was glad that she had so easily succeeded in her ruse for getting rid of Ludovic Lewis, and thus, as she fondly imagined, preserving her aunt for herself exclusively. With the short-sightedness of childhood, it never occurred to her that there was still danger of discovery.

And so hard-hearted and naughty Betty slept the sleep that is supposed to visit only the just.

XVI

THAT breakfast at Keith Hall was always a silent meal, Ludovic Lewis had already discovered during his former stay. He was somewhat surprised, therefore, when, on the morning after his return, his uncle opened a conversation. General Keith had poured out his own coffee as usual, and the quaint, old, silver coffee-pot with the long, slender spout had been carried by the butler to Ludovic. The chops, the eggs, and the toast had also been handed to him, and now the servants had left the room. The older man looked up and fastened his cold, gray eyes upon his nephew.

"What brought you back so soon?" he asked. "And why did your sister send for you?"

"She didn't send for me. It seems there was some mistake about the telegram, and I have come back to look into it. I hope I am not inconveniencing you, uncle."

"No. On the contrary, I am glad you are here. I wish for—well, we might call it your opinion."

Lewis was distinctly surprised. It was most unheard-of for his proud and self-sufficient uncle to ask counsel of any one, least of all of him, he said to himself.

"All right, sir," he rejoined, cheerfully, helping himself to more of the omelette; "very glad to do anything in my power. Investments, I suppose. Are you doubtful about any of your securities?"

"Not in the least," growled the General, "and if I were, I should not choose a young whipper-snapper like you to give me advice. You young men seem to think that what you don't know about things is not worth knowing."

"Oh, all right, uncle. Just as you say. I dare say you felt that way yourself once," said Ludovic, with unruffled serenity. "But I thought you wanted my opinion, you know."

"Not on that subject. Not by any means. No!" He pushed back his chair. "Come out on the piazza when you have finished breakfast and I will explain. We will talk it over there."

"Now by all that is unlucky!" thought Ludovic. "When I want to set things in motion about that telegram as soon as possible! I suppose he will keep me for hours talking over some ridiculous little point in his will. Which charities are to have so much, and what changes he is going to make. It is the only subject on which he ever lets himself go. Well, I am staying here, so I

have got to listen, I suppose. It can't be helped. I seem to be in for it, so the sooner it is over the better."

But it was not over for more than an hour, and when young Lewis finally left his uncle and stepped into the trap which had been brought around to the door to take him to the village, he had a new subject for consideration, which for a time seemed of more importance than the pursuit of the sender of the spurious telegram.

There was again no one to be seen at Toppan farm as he passed, although he recovered sufficiently from his abstraction to look eagerly in all directions. It was remarkable, he thought, that Edith succeeded in hiding herself so successfully. He knew now that it was Edith who was with Betty, his hurried visit to his family having gained him that information. The recollection that Betty had not wished him to know this had first led him to suspect that she had had something to do with the telegram. Why Edith was never out-of-doors when he passed he could not imagine. He supposed there must be a place at the back of the house where she was in the habit of sitting. He was determined to seek her out and have a conversation with her before he again left Maybury Centre, but not until he should first have seen the telegraph operator. He would prefer to encounter Betty while his

wrath was yet hot. Once see Edith, once settle matters with her successfully, and he felt sure that his indignation with her niece would quickly evaporate. Successfully? Ah, that was the question! He did not feel at all sure. And while going over the well-worn subject for the thousandth time, he forgot his uncle's affairs as well as the object of his drive to the village, and, absorbed in his own thoughts, would have driven past the road that led from the main street to the railroad station, had not the groom leaned from behind and reminded him that the place to telegraph from was the station, if he wished to do it.

When he entered the tiny waiting-room, however, he found that the ticket-office, which was also the telegraph-office, was closed and locked. The apparatus could be heard diligently clicking away in solitude, but there was no other sound; nor was there a person to be seen anywhere. He returned in disgust to the groom.

"There's nobody there. What a one-horse place this is, Thomas!"

"That's just what it is, Mr. Lewis," rejoined the man, eagerly, warming to his favorite topic. "When yer comes ter Maybury yer comes out o' the worruld. As I've said to James more than once, 'Give me a city loife, James,' says I. But if yer afther wantin' the station-master,

sir, yer loikely to foind him in front of the store."

A few minutes later the loungers on the platform were given a subject for conversation which lasted for many days. General Keith's smart trap swung up to the steps, and a voice of authority, which proceeded from the "young city feller" who was driving the General's tall bay, inquired of the on-lookers as to which was the station-master.

"Wal, I guess it's me if it's any one," drawled Jabe Tarleton, who was a cousin of Timothy.

"And do you receive telegrams and deliver them?"

"I guess I do the receivin' when there's any received, and as to the deliverin'—why, young feller, we don't get more'n one a year, if that, in these parts. There was one yesterday for the General tellin' him somebody or other was comin'. Why, now I come to think of it, I guess it was yourself, warn't it, now?"

"Yes, it was. But I don't wish to know anything about that telegram. What I wish to know is did you receive and write out this telegram and send it up to Keith Hall on July 31st?"

He drew from his pocket a crumpled white paper and handed it to Jabe Tarleton. Jabe smoothed it out, put on his spectacles, and read it. Sam Wilson and the postmaster, who had

been sitting with their chairs tilted back against the wall of the building, restored them to the support of four legs and leaned forward to look over his shoulders. They all read the fateful words: "Come immediately. You are needed. Hurry. Elizabeth."

Jabe Tarleton read them more than once. Then he turned the paper over and looked at the back of it. Then he again perused its face.

"Well!" exclaimed Ludovic, impatiently.

"Wal!" repeated Jabe. "All I can say, young man, is that I 'ain't never seen that there bit of paper afore."

"You haven't? Where did it come from then?"

"That's more'n I can tell you. We 'ain't never had them white blanks. Ours is yaller. That there telegraph was sent by the Postal Telegraph Company. Ours is the Western Union, and, so far as I know or hev ever heerd tell, there ain't two telegraph lines comin' to Maybury Centre as yet. We 'ain't got so much business doin' we need two lines. Who carried you that, and where's your envelope?"

"I don't know what has become of that. I threw it away, but it was just an ordinary white envelope. I remember thinking that was odd at the time. I don't know who brought it. I was in the house and did not see the person. Who usually delivers telegrams?"

"Wal, the only person who does jobs of that sort is Tim Tarleton."

"And where is Tim Tarleton? I should like to ask him about it. Can any of you direct me where to find him?"

To his astonishment they all broke into laughter. The telegraph operator slapped his leg in the ecstasy of his mirth, the postmaster grasped his long, gray beard and roared, Sam Wilson, after the first irrepressible chuckle, resumed his gravity at once, but, leaning forward, he said: "Young man, you won't get hold of Timothy for an hour or so yet, if then. Mark my words, it 'll be a good two hours afore we hear Tim's old hoss thumpin' along. Tim's drivin' the widder over to South Maybury to do her shoppin'. She's made up her mind at last to take him for better for wuss, and she's gone to buy suitable garments for the oc-casion. Ho! ho! ho! if I had an enemy I couldn't wish him wuss luck than to marry the Widder Martin. Ha! ha! ha!"

And the three friends laughed at the plight of the absent one, until the postmaster had to get out his red cotton handkerchief to wipe his eyes. "Poor Tim!" they chuckled. "Poor old Tim!"

If he could have given thought to it, there was nothing that Ludovic Lewis would have enjoyed more than further conversation with these jovial souls, but there was too much of greater

importance on his mind. He finally decided, after some further questioning, to remain for a time in the village in the hope of Timothy Tarleton's return. He dismissed the groom with the carriage, telling him that he would probably walk home, but if he had not returned by one o'clock to come for him, that he might be driven back in time for luncheon. In the mean time, he would take a walk in the neighborhood of the village.

He turned away, and left the group in front of the store to the discussion of the strange fact that a telegram had been written on white paper instead of yellow, and had reached Maybury by a line that did not come there, which mystery proved almost more absorbing than the subject of Timothy Tarleton's approaching fate. Ludovic walked off in the direction of the deserted railroad station. It occurred to him that he would follow the track for a short distance, and look at the lake near which the railroad ran.

Betty Hamilton had arisen that morning in a mood of activity, which required instant relief. She must do something "nice and exciting," she informed her aunt shortly after breakfast.

"Something I've never done before," she continued. "Couldn't we have a picnic?"

"You have had picnics before."

"Oh yes, some kinds of picnics, but this might

be different. There have always been grown-up people to manage things, and tell you it isn't time for lunch yet, or not to get your feet wet, or don't go too far into the woods. Grown-ups always spoil everything that way. What I want is just children alone—Chris and I, and perhaps that nice Lucy Smith."

"And Rachel Amy?" put in Chris, loyal to all his friends.

"Oh no, not her! Besides, she wouldn't be allowed to come with Lucy. You know that."

This was certainly a convincing argument, and Christopher said no more.

"Where would you go?" asked her aunt. The proposition was tempting to her also. It would be a relief to have Betty out of the way for a few hours. There was much that Edith would like to do uninterrupted by her active and inquiring young charge. She was also glad to have time to think these days, and she was inclined to relapse into reverie at what, in Betty's opinion, were the most inconvenient moments.

"Oh, not very far," said Betty, delighted that her suggestion was not at once frowned upon. "We'd go get Lucy Smith, and then go to one of those nice, woody places over on the other side of the village. Do say yes, Aunt Edith! And then we'll ask Mrs. Toppan if Chris can go, and if we can have some lunch to take with us."

Edith finally consented, but Mrs. Toppan was less compliant. She had scarcely recovered from her anxiety of the day before about the boy, and was unwilling to have him leave the precincts of the farm. Christopher himself was reluctant to visit the house where Peter Snell had been at work, or to go anywhere in that neighborhood if there was the slightest danger of meeting him, but the news had already reached the farm that the wire-netting was finished and in place, and that the men who put it up had really left town and gone back to the city where they belonged, so his mind was set completely at rest on that score, and he soon became as eager as Betty was to have a picnic. It was finally arranged that they should go, but for the morning only. They could take their lunch and not return to the noon dinner, but they must come home at two o'clock. When they heard the whistle of the two o'clock train, which would be plainly audible in the little wood to which they were going, they must immediately get ready to come home, and, above all, they must not cross the railroad track until after the train had passed.

"You must be very careful about that, children," said Mrs. Toppan. "There is only one train after the nine o'clock goes by until two, and that's a slow freight that goes along about ten o'clock. If there were more trains I should never

let you go to Thomson's wood. And be careful about the lake, and be sure to take Dandy. He'll be a protection. Now, what do you want for dinner?"

It was delightful to choose what they would have, and then to butter the bread for the sandwiches and put salt in a little paper to eat with the hard-boiled eggs. Christopher had never been to a picnic in his life, but Betty, out of her large experience, knew precisely what to do and to take. Two baskets were at last packed, one with the eggs and cake, the other with sandwiches and some early apples. Betty carried the heavier load, while the lighter basket was slung about Christopher's neck in the usual fashion, and then, after many more admonitions to be careful, they set forth, Dandy, the happiest member of the party, frisking along in front.

"I don't know what Mr. Toppan will say when he hears it," said Mrs. Toppan, looking after them. "He's grown to set such store by that child, he don't seem able to bear him out of his sight. If he hadn't been going to plough the farthest field this morning he'd have taken him out there, but it's dangerous work, and he thought Chris had better not be in the way."

It was a glorious day. The hot wave had passed, and after a series of showers in the night, the weather had become suddenly cool. It

seemed as though the sky had never been so blue, the grass and trees never such a green. The world had a clean, fresh look, the bracing air got into the blood and made one feel like skipping and dancing, instead of marching demurely along the road. So it appeared to Betty, but when one is walking with a lame friend, and is also carrying a heavy basket, it is necessary to restrain one's nimble movements.

The village was finally reached, however, and after the first moment of reluctance on the part of both Lucy and her aunt, the little girl was made ready to join the party. Rachel Amy heard through the wire-netting both the invitation and the reply, and she went away to weep bitter tears that she had not been asked instead of that Smith girl. She dried her eyes in time to see the party set forth. Her mother had gone to South Maybury with Timothy Tarleton, and she very much feared that soon they were to be married. It would not help matters for her if lazy Tim Tarleton, as she had always heard him called, were to become her step-father and live with them in the half-house. The world did not seem a very bright place to Rachel Amy this beautiful August morning, and she felt miserable and forsaken. And then she heard her name called softly in a familiar voice: "Rachel Amy! Rachel Amy!"

It was her aunt Lucetta. She ran out into the entry. Sitting on that half of the upper step which was hers, was Miss Lucetta, looking through the wire-netting with loving, hungry eyes.

"Child, I must talk to you," she said. "We're all alone in the house, Rachel Amy. I saw your mother go off. You're my own niece and always was and always will be. Screens and partitions can't alter facts no more than quarrels can. Sit down on your side and we'll talk things over."

The picnic party reached the little wood which was their destination, and then the fun began. Christopher and Lucy, never having been to a picnic in their lives, were quite ready to allow Betty to be complete mistress of ceremonies, and this added considerably to her pleasure. She proved herself to be a born manager, and, such is the power of one who assumes unquestioned control, she had soon reduced her comrades to total submission to every decree that she issued. She suggested all the games and taught the others how to play them, insisting upon changing to another as soon as they had become interested in the preceding one, while Dandy, in the mean time, dug innumerable holes of thrilling depth, or scoured the woods in undisturbed freedom.

The morning seemed a whirl of pleasure to all, which reached a climax when she announced that

it must be lunch-time and they would now set the table. It was precisely quarter of eleven when this plan was carried into effect, but as there was no watch in the party, they had but their appetites to guide them, and according to that method of reckoning time it was one o'clock at least, and long after their usual dinner-hour.

This important part of the day's programme over, and the egg-shells carefully gathered into one of the baskets in obedience to instructions, when even the cores of the apples were eaten and not a crumb of cake remained, Betty began to consider what should be done next. She wandered to the edge of the woods, followed by her admiring companions. In the distance—not so very far, either—on the other side of the railroad track, lay the gleaming lake. It, of course, occurred to Betty's enterprising mind that it would be very desirable to reach the shore and perhaps dabble in the water.

"It is the greatest fun in the world to play boats," said Betty. "I say we do it. Perhaps we can find a sort of cove or something, and make pretend cities and have a line of vessels going from one city to another. I did that once with some boys down at our place on Long Island. There was a big pool on the beach. Come, let's go."

"But how do we get there?" asked Christopher.

"You know auntie said we must be careful about the trains, and I don't see how we can get there from here unless we walk along the track."

"That is just what we will do. We'll walk along the track until we get to a good place to go down. Of course there will be a path farther along. They wouldn't be so stupid as not to have a place on this shore of the lake to get down to the water, just like there is on the other side."

This seemed a reasonable suggestion, and yet Christopher still hesitated. He felt that it would not be an easy matter to walk on crutches along a railroad track, but not for worlds would he have acknowledged this.

"Auntie said to be very careful about trains," he repeated.

"She said to be careful about crossing the track, but she particularly said there was only the freight and the two o'clock. Now you know the freight went by ages ago, and, of course, it can't be nearly time for the two o'clock yet. I guess you're afraid! That's what is the matter. The only boy here is a 'fraid cat!"

This was too much to endure. It was, besides, untrue.

"I'm *not* a 'fraid cat," said Chris, the color deepening in his face as it always did when his temper was rising. "Come along!"

And he marched off without waiting an instant, followed by the triumphant Betty and by Lucy, who, though a trifle timid, did not venture to object openly to anything that was suggested, no matter what its nature or purpose.

XVII

THE railroad which passed through Maybury Centre consisted of but a single track. A few miles away, at South Maybury, there was a large station with a double track and sidings and switches, but Maybury Centre, in spite of its more pretentious name, was possessed of but a small station close to the rails, and past which but one train at a time could run. The road on the south side of the station was bordered by grass and bushes which thickened into what was known as Thomson's wood, in a part of which the children had spent the morning. Beyond the wood the ground sloped suddenly. On one side of the track was a deep ravine filled with a thick growth of underbrush. On the other was Maybury Lake. The railroad was high above the lake, and was built upon made land, as it is called, and a steep incline of stones and gravel descended abruptly from it almost to the water's edge. There was a very narrow path on one side of the track, not wide enough for two persons to walk in abreast. There was also a bridge over

a small brook which ran through the ravine to the lake, the bridge consisting of a trestle through the open ties of which one could see the little stream below. It was clearly not intended that the railroad south of Maybury Centre should be used as a thoroughfare for pedestrians, and that it should occur to the children to walk there was certainly never dreamed of by Mrs. Toppan when she allowed them to go to the woods that morning, but as yet she was not thoroughly acquainted with Betty Hamilton's enterprising spirit.

They concluded to leave their baskets at the edge of the wood, for they should return that way, and it would be a pity to be burdened by superfluous luggage. They followed the path a short distance until it reached the railroad, and then they turned into the track. Dandy, who had at first been overjoyed at the prospect of further adventure, stopped short and barked. Not the bark of pleasure, but of unmistakable disapproval. He even growled, and his tail, so addicted to wagging, became very still and straight.

"Look at Dandy!" exclaimed Chris. "He doesn't want to come a bit. When he was a puppy he lived near the railroad and he saw a dog run over, a friend of his, so he hates the railroad, and never wants to go near the trains or on

the track. Uncle Dan told me about it. He said Dandy had never forgotten it."

"Then he can stay where he is and take care of the baskets," said Betty. "Dandy's a coward."

It almost seemed as if the dog understood her, for he whined dismally at her words. He stood still and watched the children make their way over the ties, then very reluctantly he followed and rejoined them. He would not stay with the baskets when he had a more important responsibility, that of guarding his beloved Chris. But he walked slowly, his drooping ears and tail expressing marked disapproval.

The bridge was crossed in safety, but with some difficulty. Betty marched serenely on, but Lucy felt giddy, and found it necessary to creep on her hands and knees. Christopher, obliged to look down in order that his crutches might be placed securely on the ties, was giddy too, but he managed to overcome the feeling. He told himself that there was really no need for alarm, for the ties and the supports beneath them were not far enough apart for him to fall through. The only danger was at the sides, and he was careful to walk in the middle. It was not a long bridge, and finally the other side of it was reached. Here began the stretch of track beside and above the lake, over the gravel road-bed with the steep sides.

"Now we're all right," said Betty. "You see, it is just as I said. At the end of this hilly part are trees and woods again, and it doesn't look nearly as steep there. We sha'n't have a bit of trouble getting down there, and it will be the greatest fun to play by the lake."

She had scarcely finished speaking when Dandy again began to whine, and to give a series of short, sharp barks unlike any that Chris had ever heard from him. He stopped, sniffed at the railroad track, and appeared to listen, then barked and whined again, jumping about Chris while he looked at him imploringly and tugged at his sleeve with his teeth.

"Hush, Dandy!" cried the boy. "Be quiet! Let me listen."

And as he listened he turned pale. There was a faint, whirring sound in the steel rails, and every moment that sound grew more clearly heard and understood.

"There is a train coming," said Chris, very quietly. "We must think what to do."

The children looked at one another, then at the length of track in either direction. They could not return by the trestle to the calm safety of the woods at the other end; there was not time for that. Neither could they remain in the narrow path beside the track, for there was not room there to meet a train. They looked down the

abrupt slope on either hand. At the foot on one side was the ravine, on the other was the lake. And with the flight of every second the train drew nearer. They heard it plainly now. The rails were ringing with its quick approach, but it had not yet come into sight, for there was a bend in the road beyond the clearing.

Lucy began to cry. Betty did not cry, but her blanched face showed her terror.

"What shall we do, Chris?" she murmured. "What shall we do?"

The boy was silent for an instant. He looked at Dandy. The dog pulled him to the side towards the lake and barked, sliding down a bit and then dragging himself up again. The sound was growing louder. It seemed to them like the noise of roaring water, rushing nearer, nearer. There was a sharp, shrill whistle.

"Quick!" cried Chris, roused into action. "We'll slide down to the lake! It's the only thing."

"As if we were coasting!" shouted Betty, instantly catching his idea. "Quick, Lucy!"

And in less time than it takes to tell it, with Dandy rolling and tumbling beside them, the three seated themselves on the edge and started on their flight down the gravel hill, stones and dust flying while they slid to the bottom. And they had barely reached it when a locomotive without cars sped over the track which they had

just left, uttering a prolonged shriek as it approached the crossing and another at the station beyond, then dashing out of sight on its special mission to the north.

"Are you all right, girls?" panted Christopher.

"Yes, all right," said Betty, while Lucy sobbed in terror and excitement. "But are you all right, Chris? Are you sure it didn't hurt you?"

"Oh, not much," said the boy, bravely. His face was very white and showed that he was in pain. "Dandy, old fellow, I guess you saved our lives. We shouldn't have heard it in time if you hadn't told us it was coming. Look, our feet are in the water!" he added, laughing that he might not cry.

It was true, though until now they had not noticed it, so great was their excitement. In fact, Lucy was sitting in the lake, just where she had rolled on reaching the bottom of the hill.

"Do stop crying, Lucy," ordered Betty. "You're wet enough now without making yourself any wetter, and there is nothing to cry about either. We're all safe now."

They sat close together on the little strip of sand that bordered the lake.

"We ain't safe at all!" sobbed Lucy. "How are we ever going to get away from here? We'll have to stay here forever, and it's all your fault,

and it's so w-wet. I wish I hadn't come! It's all your fault, Betty."

"Well, I know it is," said the culprit, unexpectedly acknowledging it, and thereby enlisting Christopher at once as her champion and defender.

"Oh, it's no more your fault than ours," he said. "We all wanted to come. We've got to think, though, how to get home. We can't get up the bank again, that's certain! Oh!" he exclaimed, and paused.

"What's the matter?"

"My crutches are up there! I left them beside the track. I can't move now until somebody comes along and gets them for me. Isn't it just awful to be lame!" For the first time tears gathered in his eyes and rolled down his cheeks.

"Well, you couldn't move anyway," said Betty, philosophically, and wishing to console him. "We can't any of us move. There's no place to go to. There's only this little strip of beach, with that brook and that place like a deep ditch over that way, and the same kind of a place, only it's got thick bushes growing over it, the other way. We couldn't possibly get through it, and if we did and got up onto the railroad again, we'd have to go back over the track, and—and—the two o'clock train might come along, you know. We don't know what time it is. We've

just got to stay here. And nobody ever goes over the track, and nobody ever rows on the lake, so I don't see how we're ever going to get away. Perhaps we'll have to stay here all night. That would be awfully exciting, wouldn't it?"

Lucy's sobs began afresh.

"Oh, Lucy, do hush up! We'd better be thinking what to do. I'll never ask *you* to come again on a picnic."

"I'd never come!" wailed Lucy. "I *h-hate* p-picnics!"

"I tell you what!" cried Christopher. He had been thinking deeply while the girls were arguing.

"What?"

"We'll send Dandy home."

"Dandy! Why he can't climb up any more than we can."

"No, but he can swim! He can go by the lake. We'll tie something round his neck to show them we need help, and tell him to go home! I've heard of people sending dogs to get other people to come help them, and you know Dandy is very intelligent and understands everything, don't you, Dandy? What shall we tie on him?"

"My handkerchief!" exclaimed Betty. "It's the very thing. What a splendid idea of yours, Chris! Oh, where is my handkerchief?" She felt desperately in her pocket. "It will be so

interesting. We can play we are on a desert island and a ship will come and take us off. We can—"

What suggestion of further romantic adventure she was about to make will never be known, for she was interrupted by a voice from above them. The words died away on her lips, and she sprang to her feet and looked up towards the top of the slope. Standing there and looking down at them was the last person she expected or wished to see, Ludovic Lewis.

"Why—why—where did you come from?" she demanded. "Oh, dear! Are *you* going to be the one to save us?"

"I doubt if I am," replied Ludovic, with a calmness that would have seemed astonishing to any one who had witnessed his agony of mind a few minutes before.

His walk had taken him to the edge of Thomson's wood, where he had come upon the picnic baskets, and a few steps from them he had picked up a handkerchief, small and dainty, although somewhat crumpled. It was marked very plainly, "Betty Hamilton."

"Ha! ha!" he had chuckled to himself. "A kind fortune is leading me right upon your trail, Miss Betty! I don't believe it will be necessary for me to interview Timothy Tarleton. I shall now get right to the headquarters of the mischief, I am pretty sure."

The barking of Dandy had shown him the direction the children had taken. He gained the track in time to see them cross the trestle. Then he, too, had heard the approaching locomotive, and, too far off to reach them, or even to shout directions which might help them, he had stood motionless, overcome by the horror of what seemed their inevitable fate. Then he saw them disappear at the side of the track, and knew that their lives had been spared, although they were but just in time. As soon as the locomotive had passed he hurried over the trestle, not knowing in what condition he should find the children after such an experience. He paused a moment above them, looking down and listening to their conversation before he made his presence known. Finding them safe and apparently unhurt, his fears for them had vanished and his previous indignation with Betty returned with added force. Had he found the little girl frightened, or in distress, he would have been full of kindness and consideration for her. When he heard her gay and ringing tones, and her suggestion of further adventure, his wrath gathered once more, in the reaction from the great anxiety which had overpowered him such a short time before.

"I am not at all sure that I shall help you out of your scrape, Betty," he said, "although I shall probably make a feeble effort in behalf of the

other little girl and your friend Christopher. I think, on the whole, I shall probably leave you here and let you send a telegram to your friends at the farm or elsewhere to come and get you. I think you understand telegraphy fairly well. It is a sort of wireless system that you use, is it not? Ah, I thought so! The color of your face betrays you, Miss Betty. Even from this height and distance I can see that it is a fine match for your hair."

His teasing voice was very irritating. It was maddening to be discovered in former wrongdoing just when she was least able to defend herself. Betty stood with wet feet, torn and draggled dress, hatless, and with frowsy hair. The very fact that her accuser was so far above her, looking down at her both literally and metaphorically, from the lofty heights of safety and righteous dealing, added to her discomfiture and her wrath.

"I'd rather have stayed here weeks and weeks and have starved to death than have you come to get us!" she burst out. "You'd have been sorry, I guess, if you'd come in a month and f-found my sk-skeleton!" She was almost crying, but the weird and fascinating picture of her bones reposing by the lake-side stayed her tears. "Then, perhaps, you *would* have been a little sorry, and Aunt Edith would have felt so dreadfully she never would have married you."

"Very likely not," he returned, calmly. "But as long as you are not a skeleton, but a very much alive and naughty little girl, I intend to ask you a few questions, and you shall answer them, or stay here until you are nothing but a bone. I am not going to be trifled with any longer. You have done mischief enough. Indeed, I have no doubt that it was your brilliant mind which first conceived the idea of coming over this track, was it not?"

"We all wanted to!" put in Chris. "Every one of us, didn't we, Lucy?"

"I didn't—not so very much," replied Lucy, unable to reach the magnificent sacrifice of self that he evidently expected of her. "I hated coming over the trestle, and I wanted to go back. You know I did, Chris."

"Well, that was afterwards. But we all thought it would be fun to come play by the lake, Mr. Lewis. All except Dandy." He caressed the dog as he spoke.

"It is very nice of you to stand by Betty," said the young man, "and quite proper that you should, but the truth is you have barely escaped a horrible accident."

He shuddered, and the thought of what it would have meant to Edith crossed his mind, and for a moment he felt more softly towards her niece. After all, she was only a child. Then he

shook it off. She had played an outrageous trick upon him.

"Betty," he said, in tones more severe than Chris would have thought possible from such a "laughing person," "did you or did you not invent a telegram calling me home?"

There was profound silence at the foot of the bank. Christopher's face grew troubled. Betty's head was so bent that hers could not be seen. Lucy looked from one to the other in wondering interest.

"If you don't tell me I shall certainly leave you here. I will bring a boat and get Chris and that little girl and take them away, and you will have to stay."

"Chris would send somebody to get me," said Betty. "It wouldn't be for so very long."

"You forget that there would necessarily be some explanation of why you did not come with us, and I should be obliged to tell the whole story. It is not a very nice story, Betty. Most people would be ashamed of having done such a thing."

"Well, I'm not!" cried Betty, vehemently. "I'm not — *not* — NOT!! I wanted you to go without knowing Aunt Edith was here, and it was the only thing to do. And you went."

"Yes, I went, very much frightened and troubled, thinking something was the matter with my father or mother, or that some other great

trouble had come. I rushed home by the night train, hurrying as fast as I could, never dreaming that any one—least of all somebody I had known as long as I have you, Betty—could have played such a trick upon me. Do you think it was a very kind thing to do?"

"No," murmured Betty.

"I am fond of jokes myself," continued this stern young judge upon the railroad bank, "but not of that nature of joke. We have laughed together a great many times, Betty, before you began to dislike me so. Do you think I would have played such a strange sort of joke on you? We were very good friends once."

"It was before you wanted to marry Aunt Edith that we ever were good friends," said she.

"We will not discuss that part of it now. It is something which should not be discussed at all, by you or any one else. Did you write that telegram?"

"Yes, I did."

"Where did you get the blank?"

"I had some in my writing-case."

"How did you send it to me?"

"By a boy."

"What boy?"

"George Smith."

"Did he know what he was doing?"

"No, of course not! That was just why I paid

him so much. 'No questions asked,' I said, and he didn't ask any."

"Ah! Very considerate of him."

"She paid him a lot!" put in Lucy, with round eyes. "She must be an awful rich girl. She paid him two dollars and a half!"

"Did he tell you?" demanded Betty, turning upon her. "Did he say what he got it for?"

"No, he didn't. He said he'd made two dollars and a half easy. It was a cinch, and he'd like a job like that every day, but he wouldn't tell me what it was."

"You were fortunate in your choice of a messenger," said Ludovic, dryly. "And I think I was something of a fool to be so easily taken in. I congratulate you, Betty. You succeeded remarkably well."

Betty looked up at him, and her angry face softened. It dimpled, and a gleam of fun came into her eyes. In a moment she was smiling, for she had caught an answering ray of half-stifled amusement in the face of her so-called enemy.

"It was a grand success, wasn't it?" she laughed, with unlooked-for mirth. "And—and —you'll forgive me, won't you? For it was a good joke, and I did so want to get you out of the way!"

"Yes, I'll forgive you, Betty," said he, as unexpectedly, "if you will promise not to play any

more such jokes. For it is much nicer to laugh than to quarrel, don't you think? And now I will go get a boat to take you off"

It is next to impossible for two persons who are blessed with the saving grace of humor to remain long at enmity, if a kind fate gives them the opportunity to laugh together.

XVIII

IT was growing dark that evening when Daniel Toppan left the farm to pay his promised visit to General Keith. August was drawing to a close, and the days were becoming shorter. The moon would be up by nine o'clock, but now there was a dim twilight over the earth and a chill dampness in the air. Crickets sang in their hidden nooks, and all the August insects joined in the chorus. There were faint rustlings in the bushes beside the road, as stealthy night creatures prowled about, a bat swooped across Mr. Toppan's path as he walked, a little owl gave its melancholy cry in the distance. But he noticed none of these things, common as the air he had breathed all his life. He was absorbed in speculation as to his coming interview with the General.

"Be firm, Dan'el!" his wife had said, at parting. "Mind you don't give way an inch unless you have to—unless he's Emily's child."

That was the great question. Was Christopher the son of Emily Keith? For the Toppans knew that Lovel was the name of the man she married.

The events of the last two days had proved to Daniel and his wife how closely bound up in Christopher their hearts had become. When Ludovic Lewis drove up in his uncle's carriage with the two children that afternoon, and told of the marvellous escape from danger which he had witnessed, it had seemed to Mr. Toppan that he could not have felt a keener anguish had the boy been his own son. He had happened to be out in front of the barn when they came back, and had himself heard the story. He was a self-contained man, with the restraint and the dignity of character belonging to the upright Northern farmer. He gave his affection to but few, and he had never known what it is to have a child to love. Chris, with his sunny face, his winning ways, his loving confidence in his new friends, had taken the man's heart by storm and laid low all the barriers of reserve and reticence. As his wife had said, the Lord had sent them a son to care for after all these years, and it seemed as if they had the right to keep him. But would it be for the child's own good? If the General desired to take him, even if he were not his grandson, should they have the right to deny the boy the advantages that he would gain by living with the richer man? That this was General Keith's plan, the Toppans felt not the slightest doubt.

The farmer reached the great, stone house on

the hill, and the servant who answered his ring showed him into the library. It was a large and lofty room, the book-shelves, stacked with every size and kind of book, reaching almost to the ceiling. A large table covered with magazines, papers, writing-materials, all the paraphernalia belonging to a man of books and learning, occupied the centre of the room, which was lighted by electricity, the glare of it softened by green shades. At one side of the table, in a huge, leather-covered chair, sat General Keith, and although his face was somewhat in the shadow, it occurred to Daniel Toppan that the large, stern features, the closely compressed lips, had never seemed so cold and forbidding. How could he deliver up his little son of sunshine to this stern man?

On the other side of the table sat Ludovic Lewis, young, handsome, full of the joy of living, his happiness eclipsed only for the moment by the fact that he could not spend this evening with Edith. He had been with her all the afternoon, but his uncle had particularly requested him to be present at the interview with Daniel Toppan.

These two men, showing in their faces the two extremes of temperament and personality, rose as their visitor entered the room, and the thought darted through his mind with unwonted quick-

ness that Christopher, even though hampered by lameness, might grow to be what Lewis was. Had he, the plain, unlettered farmer, the right to deny him this? But wait! Perhaps it would be found that he was Emily's child, and the General had sent for him to come that he might tell him this. Then the case would settle itself.

"Good-evening, Mr. Toppan," said General Keith, with stately courtesy. "I think you are already acquainted with my nephew, Mr. Lewis."

Toppan surrendered a limp hand to his host. He did not often shake hands, and scarcely knew how to perform the ceremony, nor what was expected of him in that respect. To Lewis, whom he had seen but two or three hours ago at his own place, he nodded curtly. Then he seated himself on the edge of the chair which the General designated by a wave of the hand. His most prominent thought was the wish that he had come in his every-day clothes. Martha had insisted that he should wear his "Sunday best," to be attired in which on a week-day always made him self-conscious and ill at ease. As he twirled his large, black felt hat in his hands, he was overcome with the conviction that his case was lost before the argument was opened.

Had the General possessed the power of telepathy (which, after all, is perhaps but a keener sympathy, a quicker imagination than that with

which our fellow-men are gifted), had he been able to read his visitor's mind, by an adroit charge he might have won the day at once, but he was ignorant of this opportunity, and he blundered.

"Mr. Toppan," said he, "I have sent for you to come here because there is a matter I wish settled, and settled at once. I have given the question careful consideration, and I have decided to adopt the little lame boy you have had at your place this summer. I want him."

Daniel Toppan settled back in his chair. He laid his hat on the floor and crossed one knee over the other. The only sign of agitation now visible was in the nervous clutch of his hands on the carved arms of the chair. He told himself that he was perfectly calm. The psychological moment, the moment of yielding weakness, which if seized would have insured his defeat, had passed. Irritation at the General's assumption of absolute power to do as he pleased gave Toppan the strength doggedly to resist that power, and he presently felt himself, by some subtle change, the master of the situation.

"And where would be your right to adopt him?" he asked, in the leisurely drawl which never failed to exasperate the General.

"Right?" repeated General Keith. "The right of wishing to do it, of course."

"You've got no other?"

"No, certainly not. What other would there be?"

"Then he is not your grandson? He is not the son of your daughter?"

The General's face flushed a dull, angry red, then paled until it was whiter than before. "My daughter's child is dead," he said, at last, and with visible effort. "Though the name is the same, it is merely a coincidence."

"Ah!" said Mr. Toppan.

No one would have suspected the great, overwhelming tide of relief that flooded his being. For a moment there was silence in the room, broken only by the slow ticking of the tall clock in the corner and the night sounds from without which came through the open window. However the matter might eventually be decided, the General, then, had no more legal right than had the Toppans to take the child.

"Well, Mr. Toppan," said General Keith, at last—he was leaning back in his chair, his hands upraised, the long, thin fingers meeting tip to tip—"have you anything to say? I suppose you will agree with me that it will be a good thing for the boy?"

Daniel, who had been studying the floor, raised his head and looked the General squarely in the face. "Yes, sir, I have something to say — a

good deal. My wife and I have taken a liking to that little boy, and we have decided to adopt him ourselves."

The gauntlet was definitely thrown down.

"And have you considered the two sides of the question? Have you weighed the advantages which his coming to me would give him? Have you the right to deprive him of those advantages?"

"Well, sir, I see what you mean, and I ain't going to deny there are what you may call worldly advantages on your side, but according to my way of thinking there are a few of another kind on ours. First of all, there's Mrs. Toppan. She's grown to love that little boy like a child of our own, if we had one. There's nothing you can give him, General, with all your money, that would be equal to a mother's love. He'd get that from Mrs. Toppan."

"There are many who are obliged to do without it," replied General Keith. "He will not know the difference in a little while. Children forget, I have always understood. I should give him a college education and a thorough musical training. He should have everything that money could buy, and, what is more, I should leave him handsomely provided for in my will. With the exception of my wife's nephew here, and his sister, with their mother, I have no near relatives.

I have already arranged what I intend to do for them, so it would make no difference in their prospects, for they are aware that a certain portion of my estate is to go to several charities and institutions in which I am interested. I prefer the boy to the institutions. I should leave him a rich man. Would you be justified in denying him all this?"

"I calculate to give him a college education myself. I have a tidy little sum laid by with no use for it after Mrs. Toppan and I are through with it. He can study his music if he wants to. The lad has a taste for farming, and, with his lameness, I ain't sure he wouldn't be happier and healthier living all the year round on a farm than living with you in all your grand houses. It's a question, sir, that's hard to settle for him. I see no way out of it but to let the boy choose for himself."

"It would scarcely be fair to do that. Children are easily influenced. He is living with you, and naturally his affection inclines towards you."

"If you mean that my wife and I would try to influence him or persuade him, you're wronging us," said Toppan, with simple dignity.

"Well, well, I don't mean that!" exclaimed General Keith, impatiently. "But it would be absurd to leave such an important question to be decided by a child of his age. Besides, I am not

accustomed to beg for what I wish. You consider that you have a prior right to the boy, so you must take upon yourself the responsibility of the decision. But I wish you to understand that your decision must be final. If you keep the boy, you do so altogether. I do not wish to see him or hear of him again."

He spoke with forced calmness, but it was evident that he was angry and bitterly disappointed. His hands trembled, and again the dull flush of wrath rose in his face.

"All right, General," came the slow drawl, after a pause during which the chorus of the ticking clock and the shrill insects again filled the room. "All right! I guess, so far as I can see into the matter, he's more ours than yours. I found him, I brought him here, and, what's more to the point, I love him. Yes, sir"—the slow tones trembled with the force of his emotion and his voice grew soft and sweet—"I love that little boy, our little son of sunshine! I guess, General Keith, we've got to keep him for our own, my wife and I."

The only reply from his opponent was a muffled exclamation. Ludovic Lewis, who had listened in silence to this conversation, watching the two men with keen attention, believed that his uncle's mind was actually weakening. Surely nothing could be more preposterous than the whole scheme. To adopt an unknown child, whose

ancestry was involved in mystery, and who must go through life on crutches, seemed to him a foolish mistake, to say the least. Let the General provide for the boy, if he wished, and contribute towards his education, and even have him to stay in the house occasionally, but let the farmer and his wife go the length of adopting him. It would be more justifiable in their case.

It was not that Lewis did not like the child. No one could escape the charm of Christopher's personality. Neither was it that he begrudged him a share of General Keith's property. It had long been understood in the family that half of it was to go to charity. But Ludovic Lewis was a modern man of the world, looking at such things without undue sentiment and with ordinary common-sense. Knowing his uncle's character as he did, he doubted very much if it would be for the boy's happiness to live with him as an adopted child. The ties of blood would be necessary to insure harmony. The attraction of the child might pass away. Who could tell what kind of man the little Christopher might become?

Ludovic felt greatly relieved, therefore, to find that Mr. Toppan was determined to win the day, and it was with a distinct feeling of satisfaction that he bade the farmer good-night, even though his uncle was so angry that he could scarcely

speak to his retreating visitor, who, though in retreat, was victorious.

As Daniel Toppan walked down the broad avenue, now lighted by the rays of the great, yellow, August moon but just risen above the tops of the trees, and, turning, paused to look back at the huge, stone house and the lawns and the flower-beds, the air heavy with the fragrance of a thousand blossoms, he asked himself if he were doing right or wrong to hold out against the General's wish. It was impossible for him to say. He knew that from a worldly point of view he was wrong, but deep down in his sturdy, honest heart he felt that the Keith money was not all that Christopher needed to help him through life. Money, desirable though it was, was not the greatest thing in the world, he said to himself, as he trudged back to the farm.

He described the interview to his wife, and they accepted the result of it as final. Christopher was now to be theirs. As soon as a convenient day should come, Mr. Toppan would go to the city, look up all the information that could be found relating to the boy, interview Peter Snell in the hope of extracting from him some details regarding Christopher's former life, and then place the matter in the hands of a lawyer and have the papers made out that would be necessary for the legal adoption of the child.

"As soon as this press of work is over, I'll go," said Daniel Toppan.

The first of September came and brought with it a great change. It was the day chosen for the departure of the Hamiltons, and early in the morning their trunks were piled on the open wagon and taken to the station, while the travellers sat on the piazza for the last time, waiting for Timothy Tarleton, who had been engaged to drive them over. Ludovic Lewis, who was with them, was to accompany them to the city, where Mr. Hamilton would meet them and take them to their sea-side home. His engagement to Edith had become an accomplished fact long before October in spite of Betty's manœuvres, perhaps, indeed, as their result, for Edith's indignation with her niece had induced her to lend a willing ear to her lover. Betty, feeling that she had done all that she could and more than she ought to prevent it, with her usual quick change of mood, now made the best of the situation, and she and her future uncle were already the best of friends. She had also suddenly become anxious to get back to her brothers and sisters, and Chris was forced to stifle many a secret pang of envy and jealousy, while she dilated upon the joys that were to be hers when once more surrounded by her family.

"After all, relations are nice to have," she said

to him that morning, "and I'm awfully sorry for you, Chris, because you haven't any. But you wouldn't have had any brothers and sisters, or any people of your own age even if you had gone to live with the Ge—" She stopped and clapped her hand over her mouth.

"What do you mean?" asked the boy, wonderingly.

"Oh, nothing! Let's go to the pump and get a drink." It seemed the only way of changing the subject.

"What did you mean, Betty?" he asked again, when the ceremony was over for the last time and they stood for a moment by the well.

"Nothing, I tell you. Now don't be curious. I hate curious people. Be sure you write to me, Chris, and tell me about things here. I'll write to you once a week until school begins. After that I can't write so often."

"Come, Betty!" called her aunt. "We must be ready to start at once. It is late, and here comes Mr. Tarleton."

The good-byes were said, and at last they were off. Chris watched them drive away with a sad heart. He feared that he should not soon again see his little summer friend, and he was wise enough to doubt Betty's constancy when far away.

"I suppose when people have so many rela-

tions they don't care so much about friends," he thought, as the carriage disappeared in the distance. Then he went up-stairs and took his violin, untouched now for many a day, and Mrs. Toppan, when she heard the simple music that he played with so much feeling, felt in her turn a strange sinking of the heart.

"He loves his music," she thought. "The General could give him that. Sometimes an awful doubt takes hold of me that we're not treating the boy fairly — that we ought to have let the General have him. Dearie me! Seems to me life's so full of puzzles it's a wonder we work our way through them."

And so each in his and her own way felt sad, but neither told the other.

A week later, Daniel Toppan, detained until now by pressing affairs of farm and village, carried out his intention of going to the city to learn all that there was to be learned relating to the previous history of Christopher Lovel. He intended, if possible, to return the evening of the day he left, but his carpet-bag was packed and carried with him in case of the unavoidable delay of a night.

He did not come back that night, and neither did the evening train of the following day bring him. In fact, five days passed without news

of him, and Mrs. Toppan was hourly becoming more anxious. She determined that if the week went by and still he had not come, and she had received no letter, she would herself go to the city and find out what had happened.

But on the evening of the sixth day he returned. She saw him coming, walking more slowly than was his wont, and with the head bent that was always held erect. He scarcely raised it when she hurried to meet him. She took his bag from his unresisting fingers, and slipped her other hand through his arm. He let it hang by his side, still, but he was glad of the support she gave him.

"What's the matter, Dan'el?" she exclaimed. "Have you been sick?"

"No, not sick. Only tired."

She gazed into his face. "Well, you must be real tired. I don't know as I've ever seen you look like this."

She said no more, not even asking him why he had been detained so long. She was sure that something had gone wrong. What could it be? But she did not ask a single question.

Later in the evening, when Christopher had gone to bed and there was no one about, Daniel called her to his side. They sat together on the sofa in the sitting-room. A thunder-shower had come up while they were at supper, and it was still raining, though not heavily. There was a

steady stream from the water-spout at the corner of the house, and a gentle dripping on the tin roof of the porch while they talked.

"Wife," said he, "I've had a great and terrible temptation. I've had a hard fight not to give in to it, but I didn't give in, and now I can safely say the danger's past. After all, Chris, our little Chris, belongs by rights to the General."

There was a little, inarticulate sound from Mrs. Toppan.

"Yes, Marthy, it's the truth, and I guess we've got to bear it as best we can. The Lord will help us. He didn't intend we should have any young folks of our own, and we've got to make up our minds to do without him who belongs by rights to another. I needn't have told anybody this, and for a time I felt as if I couldn't. I argued it might be better in the end for Chris to stay with us, and not have the temptations that are bound to come with all that money, with no one but that cold, hard man to teach him how to use it and to bring him up, but after a while light came to me, and I knew it wasn't my place to decide that. It was only an argument I was allowing room for, against the righteous judgments of the Lord. Truth is truth, and we can't go against it, and neither can we all have things the way we want 'em in this world. It's General Keith who's going to get his own way this time."

And then he gave her an account of his amazing discoveries.

It seemed that Peter Snell, whom Mr. Toppan had seen and talked with in the city, really supposed that Christopher had been killed by his accident. He knew that the boy had been picked up unconscious and supposedly dead, and he had not troubled himself to investigate the matter, fearing that if the child were alive he might be held responsible for the future maintenance of a possible cripple, and Mr. Toppan did not undeceive him. Snell had taken the boy when his father died, thinking to make him contribute to his own support when the child should become older by selling newspapers, or by playing the violin in the streets. When, therefore, not long before the accident, an emissary from General Keith had come to the house where Christopher's father had lived—for the General had made inquiries as to the fate of his daughter's child when he had heard of her husband's death—Peter Snell, ignorant of the Keith wealth, had lied to the person who came, and had told him that the child died before the father. As General Keith lived in New York in the winter and in Maybury in summer, Snell knew nothing about him beyond the fact that he was the boy's grandfather. He did not know even now that there was money to be gained, or any advantage to be

had, by giving correct information in regard to Christopher, and it was merely because Daniel Toppan had chanced to find him in a communicative mood that he had now told all this, including the fact that the child's mother was the daughter of a general who had fought in the Civil War, and whose name was Keith. Toppan left him without disclosing his own name, nor that Christopher had recovered from the accident. They learned afterwards that General Keith had never heard the name of Peter Snell until the day he found the frightened boy in the woods, for at the time the inquiries were made the man was living under an assumed name.

Mr. Toppan had gone afterwards to the Home and brought away the wedding-ring. In it were the initials "W. L. to E. B. K.," and a date. Then for four days he had struggled with temptation. At the end of that time he had gone to the lawyer whom he had intended to employ to make out the papers of adoption, and had told him the whole story.

"I knew it was the only way," said Daniel to his wife. "Unless I told some one else before it was too late, you know it might have come over me again. There's no knowing. Man's but a weak creature at the best of times, and that's mighty good advice in the Bible, Marthy, where it tells you to flee from temptation. Sometimes

there's more courage to be shown in fleeing than in staying to wrestle with it. So I told the lawyer all about it, and then we went to Peter Snell, and by paying him a sum, we got him to tell all he knew and promise not to bother us any more. Of course, it won't do him any good to bother the General, anyway, for he's acknowledged that Chris is his grandson, and it 'll be to Snell's interest to keep out of the way now, seeing he's treated the boy so shamefully. It makes my blood boil to think of all that child's been through."

His voice ceased, and for a time Mrs. Toppan said nothing. The only sound was the drip, drip, drip of the rain on the roof. She was looking at the ring, turning it over and over, and reading the inscription. She did not slip it on her finger.

"William Lovel to Emily B. Keith," she murmured. "I guess her middle name was Baldwin, her father's name. And our little Chris is their child, and Emily was the General's child. Ah, Dan'el, we've got no right to him, and we've got no right to begrudge him to the General. He's no longer ours. He's no longer our little boy."

She laid her head on her husband's shoulder. And again the only sound was the drip, drip, drip of the rain on the roof. And up-stairs Christopher, in the happy ignorance of childhood, lay sleeping.

The next morning, in a few words, as briefly as possible, they told the boy the story. He listened very quietly. Suffering had already taught him to control his feelings, experience had already showed him that life is full of change, and that change is often sudden. Probably he did not then realize all that was meant by this latest development, that he, the little waif, so lately homeless, friendless, kinless, was now the heir of Keith Hall and the grandson of his friend the General. He did know, however, and know well, the love of those who had brought this about. He looked from one to the other. He held up his face to Daniel Toppan to be kissed, then he turned and threw himself into Mrs. Toppan's motherly arms, out-stretched to receive him.

"No matter who I am, I'm always going to have you for my uncle and auntie," he said.

A little later they sent him to the General. He walked there alone, as he had so often walked before, a paper in his pocket setting forth his history. The General, sitting on his piazza while he waited for his horse to be brought around to the door for his morning ride, heard the familiar thump of the crutches on the hard surface of the avenue. He looked up quickly, the irrepressible gleam of gladness in the usually cold eyes being quickly followed by one of annoyance.

"Why have you come here again?" he asked. "I told Mr. Toppan I did not care to see you here again."

Christopher stood at the foot of the steps, leaning on his crutches and looking up. The rain of the night before was over and the skies were clear. He had taken off his hat, and a ray of sunlight rested on his hair, making it all bright and shining like a golden crown. At first the harsh words troubled him, and his eyes were sad and frightened. Then they grew merry, and his whole face lighted up with smiles.

"Wait till you hear!" he laughed. "You don't know who I am, grandfather! I'm really your little grandson, and here's a paper telling you all about it."

And on his head still rested the ray of sunshine.

THE END

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